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OR,

Old True Blue's Pilgrimage in Satan's Section.

A Romance of the Red Spur Ranch, and
Companion Story to "Old True
Blue, the Trusty."

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "CAPTAIN NAMELESS," "AZTEC
JACK," "OLD PLUG UGLY, THE ROUGH AND
READY," "OLD DISMAL," "HUSTLER
HARRY," "COLONEL COOL,"
ETC., ETC.

PROLOGUE.

BORDER JUSTICE.

MOVING northward along the trail which
runs from old Fort McLane to Silver City, New
Mexico, were four horsemen. It was night, but
the heavens above were studded with silver
stars, and the moon, like a crescent clipped
from burnished steel, hung over the lonely peaks

HAL LED THE CHARGE, AND THE ENTIRE PARTY CAME THUNDERING AND YELLING
DOWN INTO THE HOLLOW.

of the Mimbres Mountains. The combined starlight and moonlight revealed the fact that one of the four men was a captive, being bound upon the horse he was riding and having his hands secured behind him.

At the head of the party was the Sheriff of Silver, and one of the others was a deputy. The third man was tall, angular and awkward in appearance, and spoke with a genuine Yankee twang and drawl, but Truman Ballou—familiarly called "Old True Blue"—was known far and wide in the Wild Southwest—known as a man to be highly esteemed as a friend and respected and feared as an enemy. Having an undying hatred of anything mean or dishonorable, and being a man who would rather die than break faith or fail to keep a pledge, it was not strange that he was known by the additional appellation of "The Trusty."

The fourth man was a trifle above medium height, finely formed and certain to attract attention anywhere. It was his face that caught and held the eye of the beholder. It was a face of regular, almost handsome features, but something about it seemed to rob it of its attractiveness. Just what that something was it would have been hard to tell, but it gave one a chill as if he were looking on features chiseled from a block of ice.

This man was Saul Raguel—"Sleek Saul"—gambler and desperado, whose hands more than once had been stained with human blood. Just now he was in custody on the charge of murder, and Old True Blue had been highly instrumental in his capture.

As they rode along, the sheriff, glancing first at the moon and then at the face of the captive, remarked:

"We shall be lucky ef we git you into Silver ter-night. Thet is a fine moon fer a lynchin' bee, an' I sh'udn't wonder ef ther boys wuz lookin' fer ye, Saul."

The gambler made no reply; his face remained cold and unmoved.

Just ahead the trail passed through a grove of mesquite, and barely were the four horsemen within the shadows of the trees when they suddenly found themselves surrounded by a band of masked and mounted men.

"Make no resistance!" commanded the leader of the masks, covering the sheriff with a cocked revolver. "We are here for business, but you will not be harmed if you do not make a fool of yourself. It's the cuss you have in tow we're after."

The deputy and Old True Blue also found themselves threatened by cocked weapons.

Everything seemed planned beforehand; not a moment's time was lost. Out to the border of the grove the masks conducted the four men, and there, in the white moonlight, a rope was fitted around the neck of the icy-faced gambler. It was useless for the sheriff or his companions to protest; their words were not heeded.

"Cut the whelp free from the horse, and see that his hands are secure," commanded the leader of the masked dispensers of border justice.

When everything was ready, the rope having been passed over the limb of a tree, the leader turned to Sleek Saul, speaking sternly, with no show of compassion:

"Saul Raguel, you are about to die. We are the avengers of Charley Darril, as white a man as ever breathed, whom you brutally killed. It is but just you should meet death in this manner, as a well-merited punishment for your crime. If you have anything to say, speak now, for it is your last chance."

Cold and even was the voice of the iron-nerved gambler, but it caused a shudder to run down the back of the listening sheriff. He spoke without a sign of fear.

"You may kill me, but I will not remain dead! As true as there is a Heaven above us—as sure as day follows night, I will rise from the dead and wreak vengeance on the men who brought me here! Their blood shall atone for my blood! I swear it with my dying breath! Now do your worst!"

The rope was made fast, the horse struck a smart blow, and then, the animal having dashed forward, the gambler was dangling in the air.

"Riddle him, boys!" shouted the leader of the masks.

In an instant revolvers appeared in the hands of the masked dispensers of border justice, and then they were turned on the swaying form. At least fifty shots were fired in a very few seconds, and although one of the bullets cut the rope and allowed Saul Raguel to fall to the ground, where he lay in a shuddering heap, the relentless men were not satisfied. Even then they continued to fire.

Finally they turned away, leaving that silent figure lying there beneath the tree, half the body within the shadow of the branches, half of it revealed by the clear white moonlight that fell on the upturned, ghastly face. Their terrible work was over, and they rode away to Silver City, taking the sheriff and his two companions with them.

In the morning some scattered bones of a human being lay beneath the tree, from the limb of which dangled a severed rope.

The wolves had enjoyed a feast in the night!

CHAPTER I.

AN INTERRUPTED WEDDING.

THERE was to be a wedding at the Red Spur Ranch, and the guests were gathering. The Red Spur was owned by Zeb Horn, and one of the brides-to-be was his daughter, sweet-faced, golden-haired, blue-eyed little Kate. She was one of them, for the wedding was to be a double one, and Jackson Ballou was not alone in the happiness of securing a loving and trusting heart.

Little Kit's adopted sister was to be the other bride, and two years of education and refining influence had left scarcely a trace of the Indian about the queenly, dark-eyed Silver Tongue, in whose veins flowed the mingled blood of red and white. The Indian name had been changed to that of Sylva Horn, scarcely less beautiful and suggestive.

And Matthew Miles—"Maverick Mat"—a handsome, blonde-mustached young cowboy of the Red Spur Ranch was to become the happy possessor of the modest and charming Sylva.

Jackson Ballou and Matthew Miles had been warm friends and staunch pals for years. In the old days Jack had been called "Hurricane Hal," and the name still clung to him after his true title was known. Even his own father, Old True Blue, learned to call his boy Hal.

Tall, handsome, with dark hair and eyes, impulsive and energetic, always doing things with a dash, it was not strange he had been compared to a hurricane. As true a friend as ever breathed, but a stern and unbending enemy, his veins were filled with hot blood that would lead him to face certain death to save a pard or to avenge a wrong.

"Neow yeou looker heur, Zeb Horn," said Old True Blue, as he buttonholed the homely little ranchman and bent his tall figure till his face was on a level with that of the one he was addressing, "I want ter know ef yeou think this is a fair shaik?"

"W'at d'yer mean, you long-legged ole varmint?" asked Old Zeb, with a pretension of anger, though there was a sly twinkle in his keen gray eyes that told of the merriment and good-nature he was trying to hide. "W'at yer drivin' at, anyhow?"

"I want ter know ef yeou think this is a fair shaik?" again demanded the Trusty. "Yeou're gittin' ther best eend of this bargain anyhow I kin make it aout."

"How's thet?"

"Why, looker heur, Zeb; whut be I gittin' by this weddin'?"

"A darter—as good er gal as ever drored breath."

"Ugh!"

Old Zeb bristled up.

"W'at in blue blazes do ye mean by thet grunt?" he snapped. "Doye mean ter 'sinowate thet gal hain't jest w'at I says? Ef you do—Waal, you an' I hev bin good frien's fer y'ars, but dern me ef I don't punch yer head!"

Old True coughed to disguise the chuckle of satisfaction that escaped his lips.

"Why, Zebbie!" he drawled; "yeou 'mind me of er young bantam rooster, darned ef yeou don't! Yeou bristle up jest like one. He! he! he! Ole man, yeou dew make me larf!"

He was unable to conceal his amusement longer.

Zeb doubled up his fist and inspected it carefully, then he stood off a pace and ran his eyes over Old True's lank figure. Following this, he shook his head dubiously.

"I don't durst ter do it," he muttered, as if speaking to himself. "Ef I hit thet anywhar in ther middle I shell break it plumb in two, an' I can't reach ter ther upper eend o' it ter save me. I don't want ter murder ther pore devil, so I'll hev ter let it go this time."

Truman Ballou rubbed his pointed chin with the thumb and fore finger of his left hand, while he stared down at Zeb. It was a comical tableau, on account of the great contrast between the two men.

"Sa-ay," drawled Old True, "le's drap it."

"All right, ef you will tell w'at yer meant by sayin' I wuz gittin' ther best eend o' ther bargain. I'm only gittin' er son, an' you are gittin' er darter. W'at in blazes be you kickin' erbout?"

"Neow, hole on, Zeb! Be yeou *only* gittin' a son? I callate yeou'll see whur yeour mistake is ef yeou look long ernough. I'm only gittin' one darter; but I'm darned ef yeou hain't gittin' two sons!"

Zeb caught his breath, then punched Old True in the ribs, exclaiming:

"You onery olelemon! I didn't know w'at you wuz drivin' at—hanged ef I did! But, 'sh! Thar they be! Look at 'em, you ole sinner—look at 'em, an' let yer buzzum swell with pride! Be them cowboys? Woof! They're fit fer ther best parlor in the worl! Be them cow-punchers? Wow! I reckon thar's some mistake hyer!"

Hal and Mat had entered the room, arm-in-arm, and were stopping to speak with those who immediately flocked around them. Both the young men were faultlessly attired in dress suits, and, but for the tan of sun and wind upon their hands and faces, they might have passed as gallants of the drawing-room, grace, culture and

refinement being shown in every word, look and motion.

"Great gosh all hemlock!" guardedly spluttered Old True Blue, his eyes glistening with admiration. "Hain't they good ones! Wa-al, I swan ter man, they be!"

"Some o' ther older men thort I wuz a derved fool w'en I made Hal foreman o' ther Red Spur," observed Zeb. "Humph! I knowed w'at I wuz doin'! Ther boy has made a good foreman, ef he is er leetle impulsive now an' then. He don't putend ter know all thar is ter l'arn 'bout ther business, but w'at he knows he knows, you bet! An' he's allus keepin' his eyes an' ears wide open. Thar'll come er day w'en he'll own his own ranch, an' ef he ain't er rich man it won't be his fault. Luck'll be plumb erg'in' him."

"An' ther t'other 'un—he hain't no slouch! Thet feller's cooler then Hal, but he don't lack clean grit. He's got plenty o' sand, an' er good level head keeps him stiddy all ther time. I tell you, True, I'm proud o' my boys!"

"Put her thar, Zeb!" and the Trusty extended a long hand. "Put her thar fer ninety years! Yeou can't be no prouder of 'em than I be!"

"I tell you, pard, I made a good turn w'en I sold ther mine an' bought this yar ranch. It guv ther boys er chance."

"Shure! Yeou didn't hev ther rocks ter develop ther mine, an' it wur jest er dead weight on yer han's. It's true that ther company as bought it are makin' er big showin', but that's suthin' you c'd never done 'thout cash as ye didn't have. Yas, Zeb, yeou wur level-headed w'en ye sold it."

Zeb looked anxiously at his watch.

"I wonder whar ther parson is?" he said. "He oughter be hyer by this time, but he hain't come."

"Waal, Silver is er long ways, an' suthin' may have delayed his startin' soon as he suspected. Parson Jones will be on han', ole man; don't ye worrit."

The two bridegrooms-to-be now came forward and greeted Zeb and old True Blue. The old Yankee could not restrain his impulse to chaff them a little.

"Neow, I s'pose yeou fellers think yeou look 'tarnal fine!" he observed, with an apparent sneer, but with that merry twinkle still in his fine eyes. "I do wish ye c'd see yerselves in them swaller-tail coats! He, he, he! Oh, I can't help larfin'! He, he, he!"

He nudged Zeb in the ribs, and the little rancher joined in the merriment. But the young men were not taken aback in the least, for they laughed as heartily as the others.

"It is your turn to laugh now," said Hal. "We will laugh when we possess the prizes we covet."

"An' ye desurve 'em, boys," suddenly came soberly from Zeb's lips. "I hain't fergot how ye worked ter save Leetle Kit frum Red Han', ner ther resk ye run in doin' it. But fer my brave frien's, ther outlaw w'd hev snatched my child frum me an' crushed ther life frum my ole body. I hev not fergot ther hours o' madness I spent w'en I wuz a pris'ner in his han's, confined in thet dark cavern dungeon! No, no! I kin never fergit thet ter my dyin' day!"

"But the Red Hand is dead now," spoke Mat.

"An' his villainous brother, Sleek Saul, ther gambler," nodded Old True. "W'en he killed Charley Darril he sealed his own doom. I helped ther Sheriff of Silver run him daown—"

"But ye didn't git him back ter Silver," put in Zeb.

"No. Ther boys wur waitin' fer him. They hung him ter a tree an' then riddled him with lead."

"I heard he swore to return to life," remarked Hal.

"He did, but he'll have er hard time keepin' his oath, by gosh! They must have pumped fifty bullets inter him. One cut ther rope an' let him drap, but yeou bet they kep' right on pumpin'! I wur with ther craowd thet went aout frum Silver ther next mornin' ter give him burrial."

"Then, like his brother, the Red Hand, he is dead and buried?"

"Waal, he's dead; but thar wurn't much of him ter burry."

"How was that?"

"Ther wolves hed called on him in ther night. We foun' er few bones."

"Well, the Southwest is well rid of a desperate villain. There are others who should follow him. But this is scarcely a suitable subject for the occasion."

Laughing lightly, Hal turned the conversation into another channel, and Sleek Saul, the gambler was forgotten.

Meantime, the two girls were dressing in a room above, assisted by Kate's mother and Norah, the Irish maid.

"Och, hone! but it's two angils shtraight frum hiven yees hiv the look av, me darlins!" cried the impulsive Irish girl, standing off to survey them, her attitude one of rapt admiration. "Nivver did Oi say the loikes av this soight before! An' it's so diff'runt yees be! Wan has a kimplexion loike th' tint av a rose an' oies loike a bit av a thoonder-cloud. An' lips—oh, the saints look at thim rid lips with

niver a bit av paint on them at all, at all! An' thit nose, thim ears—faith they be loike two pink shells fram the botthum av the say! An' thit black hair— Oh, wurra, wurra! whoy wasn't the loikes av mesilf borrun barnsum! Thim Oi moight git marrid mesilf an' not live an' doie feriver an auld maid."

Sylva showed her white teeth in a smile.

"There is little need for you to worry, Norah," she said. "I know of some one who has his eye on you."

The girl threw up her hands in apparent amazement.

"Who ivver dr'amed av thit noow!" she cried. "It's mistookken ye must be, Miss Sylva! Nivver a saoul in all this wide worruld cares for Norah at all, at all."

"It is you who are mistaken, Norah. The poor fellow is nearly dead with love for you, and still you hold him at bay. I am afraid you are not treating him just right, if you wish to get married."

"Noow who in the worruld kin yees be meanin'!"

"As if you didn't know! Why, Mike, of course—Mike Maloney."

"Thit spalapeen! May the Auld B'y fly away wid him! D'yees s'pose Oi'd hiv thit gossoon moonin' around me? He is so soft ye kin stbick a finger inther him anywhers! It's not th' loikes av him Oi'd be afther takin' for me hoosband!"

"I am afraid you are too particular, Norah," observed Kate.

"An' noow will yees hear thit! An' isn't it a bit particular yees be yersilf? Theer wur thit Lieutenant Cranshtun as balongs in th' army, nivver a bit w'd ye hiv t' do wid him, though th' pore feller wur nighly did wid love av yees. An' noow they say he has got himsilf inther some koind av shrape an' turned deserter rayther thin face it out. It wur all—"

"Norah!"

That word was enough. In a monent the impulsive girl was checked, and she entreated:

"Do be afther pardoning me, Miss Kitty! It's me toonge I let roon away wid me brains. An' you a-lookin' so sad jist whin ye ought to be all smoiles! Nivver a bit kin Oi undershtand it! It's swate yees look in thit illigant dress, so it is! Nivver a bit kin Oi tell which av you two looks th' bist! If Oi wur a marn Oi'd be shtruck to know which av ye to take, so Oi w'd! It's the both av yees Oi'd be afther wantin'."

"Oh, Miss Kittyl it's loike a lily ye looks! Yer oies are blue as a bit av th' clear sky, an' yer hair is loike thrids av soonshoine. Yer lips are swate as th' honey-dew th' bees sip fram the rose, an' yer tathe—"

"That will do, Norah. You are sadly given to flattery to-day."

"Nary a bit av flatthery is it at all, at all."

Kate's mother had been watching her daughter anxiously, and now she drew the girl aside, while Norah attended to the wants of Sylva.

"It's true, Kittie," said Mrs. Horn, slowly, "as Norah wuz sayin', ye look kinder sad like. What's ther matter, child?"

Kate passed an arm around her mother's waist, but did not meet the eyes that were trying to read her face.

"It's nothing, mommy," she answered, speaking the name as of old in the years gone by.

"Now don't ye tell me that!" returned the woman, reading a secret in those averted eyes. "Thar is suthin' troublin' ye. I kin see it in yer face. What is it, Kittie? Can't ye trust yer poor ole mommy? I know I hain't eddicated—"

"Stop, mother!" and some white fingers closed over the woman's mouth. "You cannot know how you hurt me when you speak like that. You are my mother! Two years ago I was not educated! I am not educated now, mother. Two years cannot give one an education, although I know it has improved me. Still I am the same girl you used to hold in your dear arms—I am the same girl you sung to sleep in the old cabin home. My taste of knowledge has not changed my heart, and I love my mother the same as of old, and always—always shall!"

"I knowed it, child—I knowed it! You mustn't mind w'at I say. I'm gittin' ole, an' I can't be with ye long—"

"Mother!"

"It's ther truth, Kate."

"Please don't talk that way now! I am sad enough, as it is, and—"

"I knowed it!" the mother again exclaimed. "Now ye have confessed it. W'at makes ye so, Kittie? Are ye sorry you're goin' ter merry Hal?"

"No, no, no! It is not that! I know not what it is, but, something presses on my heart; I am full of sadness, and fear, too. I cannot understand why, but I feel as if there were a terrible calamity about to befall me. I have been thinking of poor Frank Cranston. Mother, he loved me! My rejection o' him drove him to drink, led him into the duel that stained his hands with blood and made him a deserter—an outcast! Last night I dreamed of him. I thought he came to warn me of some terrible danger. I did not understand what it was, for I woke just when he was telling me. Since then I have

been oppressed—I have felt as if a cloud were hanging over me."

"An' all fer a dream! I didn't know ye wuz foolish as thet, Kate."

"Mother, do you remember one dream of long ago and how nearly it came true?"

"I 'member, Kate; but, it didn't quite come true; so cheer up. Ther guests hev all come, an' look—" pointing out of the window—"thar comes ther parson now!"

Two men were riding toward the ranch, one being dressed in black, like a clergyman, the other in garments that plainly indicated he had been engaged to accompany the first.

Straight up to the ranch building rode the two men, to be met by Zeb Horn.

"Hello!" exclaimed the old rancher, in surprise. "This hain't Parson Jones!"

"No," replied the dark-clothed individual, dismounting; "but I am here in his stead. Unfortunately, he was taken ill this morning, and so was unable to come. Hesent me in his place, as this letter will explain."

He handed a letter to the old man, who at once tore it open and slowly spelled out its contents. It was brief and to the point, saying the writer was too ill to travel so far, but he would send a worthy brother in his place—one fully qualified to perform the ceremony—and ended in introducing Elder Prince.

"So you are Parson Prince, be ye?" and Zeb extended his hand.

"I am," was the reply, as the offered hand was accepted.

"Wal, I'm glad ter meet ye, though yer face don't look much like er parson's, fer it is kivered with beard."

"That is for the protection of my throat. I have a bronchial trouble, and the night breezes of this locality affect me somewhat, so I wear a full beard."

A few moments later the parson followed Zeb into the building.

Preparations had been completed for the wedding. At the handsome piano sat a genuine cowboy pianist, one of the herders of the ranch, known among his companions as Gentle George. He was known to be a skillful performer on the instrument, and when the moment came for the bridal march to be played, he gave a good exhibition of his skill.

The music swelled and rolled in one grand burst of sound, then sunk and died to a sweet strain that had a tender touch of sadness about it. Then it throbbed like the life blood in the veins of a strong man battling with the world. Again it sunk to a low murmur, but it was the passionate words of a lover as he whispered in the listening ear of the one he held dearer than all other things—dearer than his own life. Another sound—singing, rejoicing! The lovers were happy—to each other they were all in all. Then came a soft sound like a mother singing above the cradle of her first born.

Those who listened were entranced by the wonderful performance—enthralled by the magic strains drawn from the piano by the cowboy, who was a mystery to his most intimate companions.

Suddenly every eye was turned to catch a glimpse of the happy couples. They came, Hal and Kate, Mat and Sylva. What was it? More than one caught his breath as he looked on the face of the rancher's daughter. It should have been full of happiness; it was sad and full of fear. How pale she was. She clung trembling to the arm of the strong and handsome young man who was to be her husband. Usually all smiles and sunshine, this day she brought a cloud into the room with her.

The music seemed to catch the feeling, and for one instant it sobbed with a heartbroken sound, then it burst into a wild flood-wave of joy and triumph, as if seeking to overcome and crush the sadness.

The chosen bridesmaids were not there, for reasons that made their presence impossible at the last moment, and this had combined with other things to fill the heart of the ranchman's daughter with dread of some impending affliction or calamity.

The dark-clothed man stood in his place. The couples were in their positions, and the ceremony began.

Every ear was strained to listen; every eye was watching. All saw the rancher's daughter start and grow still paler at the first words; all saw the strange look she cast upon the clergyman. Had they not told her Parson Jones's place would be filled by another?

A feeling that there was something wrong about the wedding seemed to settle over all. Things had not gone right from the first, and now all felt as if a catastrophe was impending.

The clergyman seemingly was calmest of all. He appeared to notice nothing amiss. Steadily and unbrokenly he went on with the ceremony.

What was that? Only the sound of the clergyman's voice as heard within the room, but from far away on the outside came a faint shout. Then those who listened heard the sound of a horse approaching at a mad gallop. Near the windows some turned to look out, but the winding trail was hidden by the mesquite timber through which it passed.

Still the sound of the galloping horse came nearer—nearer.

The clergyman apparently now heard the sound for the first time, and of a sudden he spoke more swiftly, as if anxious to complete the ceremony. It was almost over. In another moment the four would be pronounced married.

A wild clatter of hoofs at the door—a ringing shout! Then a man covered with perspiration and dust burst into the apartment, crying hoarsely:

"Hold, you infernal scoundrell! I am here to block your little game! Another word and I will send a bullet through your brain!"

In the man's hand was a cocked revolver, the drop covering the parson's head!

CHAPTER II.

BACK FROM THE DEAD!

A STARTLING tableau it was, and for several moments not a word was spoken by any one in the room.

Strangely enough, the threatened man was the first to regain his composure.

"What is this?" he demanded, sternly eying the dust-covered man intruder. "This person is crazy! Take him away before he does some damage!"

Several men started to their feet, as if to obey; but once more the intruder's voice rung through the room:

"Stop! I am here to unmask that villain!"

"Hev a care, you!" cried Old Zeb Horn.

"Thet man is a parson—thet is Parson Prince."

"Well named, for he is the prince of frauds! He is no more a parson than I am!"

"An' who be you?"

"A man who has risked his life to save your daughter from the snare set for her!"

At the first alarm, Little Kit had fallen half-fainting on her lover's arm, and she stared at the intruder as if she saw a ghost. Now she started up, and her voice rung out wildly:

"It is Lieutenant Cranston!"

There was a hush—a breathless pause of amazement—then twenty voices exclaimed:

"The deserter!"

The identified man shrunk back a pace, but he did not lower the revolver which covered the head of Parson Prince. There was a startled look in his eyes, but he still kept them on the one he had accused.

"Great gosh all hemlock!" spluttered Old True Blue. "This is suthin' that wurn't laid daown on ther programmy!"

"I am Frank Cranston!" boldly confessed the man with the revolver, "and I have put my life in danger in order to save these innocent girls from the meshes of the net set to entangle them and drag them down to ruin! I believe that make-up parson is only a tool in the hands of others who are at the bottom of the game! That beard on his face is false!"

An exclamation of anger broke from the lips of the accused, but he did not flinch. Again he cried:

"The man is deranged! He has dared intrude on such a solemn occasion, and to accuse an ordained minister of the Gospel! Look at his eyes! You can there see the light of insanity! Take him away before he does damage!"

"An' ther critter's er self-confessed deserter!" cried a cowboy from an open window. "Thar's er price on his head, an' I mean ter hev it, by howlin' cats!"

Into the room leaped the speaker, a drawn revolver in his right hand; but, quick as thought, a derringer appeared in the grip of Hurricane Hal, and the cowboy's voice rung through the room:

"Hold hard, Spotted Dan! I have you covered! Go slow and give us a chance to sift this matter!"

"That's right, by gosh!" nodded Old True.

"That boy has a level head, yeou bet!"

This brought the cowboy to a halt, and then Hal faced Frank Cranston.

"You have made a serious charge, sir," came from his mustache-shaded lips. "You must sustain it, or it will be the worse for you!"

Something like a sneer passed over the face of the man addressed.

"And so that is the return you make!" he cried. "Well, if I could only prove the whole black truth, I fancy it would be a bad thing for you!"

"What do you mean?"

"Darned ef that hain't queer talk!" drawled Old True.

"As if you do not know what I mean!" came scornfully from the lieutenant's lips. "But, I cannot prove it—"

"I told you so!" triumphantly broke in the parson. "The man is out of his head! The sooner he is cared for the better it will be for every one."

"But the lieutenant still kept the drop on the dark-clothed individual.

"I can prove my charge against you!" he retorted. "More than that, I will prove it at once!"

Parson Prince fell back a step, his hand dropping toward his hip-pocket.

"Hold there!" and sparks of fire seemed to dart from the eyes of the deserter. "Attempt

to draw a weapon, and I will surely put a ball through your head!"

It was plain he would keep his word.

Things seemed at a deadlock for a moment, but they were not to remain so long.

"I will tell you how I know that man to be a fraud," said the lieutenant. "The story shall be as brief as I can make it. Listen all!"

"I knew of this wedding here, to-day, and I was within fifteen miles of the ranch. With my horse concealed in the timber at the foot, I crept to the top of Razor Ridge, from which point I was able to see the ranch through my field-glass, and I could also survey the trail that runs toward Silver. It was looking along the trail, aided by my glass, I saw two men riding toward the ranch from the direction of Silver. One of these I recognized as Elder Jones, and I knew he had been chosen to officiate here to-day. As I was looking, I saw several men crouching behind the Painted Boulders which lay close beside the trail. There were masks over their faces, and their aspect was that of highwaymen. They kept themselves carefully concealed as the parson and his companion approached, and I knew they meditated some evil move. Still I was so far away that I could not warn Elder Jones and his companion of the danger into which they were plunging. I could only wait and watch. Like one—"

"This is nonsense!" cried Parson Prince. "Elder Jones is in Silver, and he had not left his bed to-day when I came from the town. I was sent here to fill his place, as I have a letter to prove."

"The letter is a skillful forgery, and you are its author!" rung out the voice of the undaunted lieutenant. "That I will prove before I am done. If you were the honest man you claim, you would keep still and listen to my story. In that case it would do you no harm, as you could easily prove it false. If you do not keep quiet, these people will know I am speaking the truth, even though I give them no further proof."

"Well, then, go on!" and the parson made a gesture of resignation. "May the Lord pardon you for the lie you are telling!"

The deserter-lieutenant continued his narrative.

"Like one fascinated I watched the two men approaching the dangerous spot. I saw the masked men prepare for the spring; and when Parson Jones and his companion reached a certain point, every mask came leaping out from behind the rocks. Not a shot was fired, although Elder Jones's companion tried to use his revolver. Both men were torn from their horses, crushed to the ground and made prisoners, all within a few seconds. Then, when their hands and feet were secured, they were dragged away. A short distance from the trail is a small grove, and thither they were taken."

"It happened that my position enabled me to witness what followed. At the grove the minister's hands were released, and, threatened by several revolvers, he was forced to remove his clothes to the under-garments. These clothes were immediately donned by one of the masked men, a person who seemed to be the leader. They were an excellent fit. Then the man removed his mask and adjusted a false beard to his face. Unfortunately he was standing with his back turned toward me, so I could not see his face when he removed the mask. When he turned toward me, his features were disguised by the beard. Selecting one of his men, they mounted horses and rode onward toward the ranch, while the parson and his unlucky companion were dragged still further into the grove."

"Then I comprehended the whole black plot. But, how was I to baffle it? I was fifteen miles away and my horse was on the side of Razor Ridge opposite Red Spur Ranch! I was not long in seeing my only chance, and but a few minutes were wasted in descending the Ridge. Once astride my horse, I rode as I never rode before, for I had to pass over at least twenty miles before I could reach this ranch, being obliged to go round the Ridge."

"As I came in sight of the ranch over the Great Swell, I saw more than a dozen masked horsemen ride into the timber down yonder in the ravine. I have no doubt they are more of this crafty rascal's followers, and they contemplate some move on the ranch. If not that, then they are in the vicinity for the purpose of protecting their leader if he gets into trouble. And there stands their leader, the man who claims to be an ordained minister of the gospel. I have him covered, and I mean to end his treacherous life if he makes one attempt to escape."

Every eye was now turned on the parson, who stood with folded arms, a dark cloud on his brow.

"Whut have yeou ter say fer yerself, parson?" demanded Old True Blue. "Whut have yeou ter say? Speak up."

"Do you believe this wretch, on whose head there is a price?" scornfully asked the man in black.

"He has tole er purty darned straight story."

"And you have swallowed it. What could be my object in coming here in such a manner?"

"That sticks me, by gosh."

"I could have no object, and that is enough to prove the words of this man false. There is a lake of fire and brimstone prepared for all liars, and in it he will surely be cast! May the Lord have mercy on his sinful soul."

"That's er purty good bluff," cried Zeb Horn; "but I'm durned ef I don't b'lieve I begin ter smell a nice hyer."

"If that man has lied," said Hurricane Hal, "the beard on your face is natural. If it is false, it can be easily removed. Demonstrate to us it is natural and cannot be removed, and we will know this man has lied."

For one moment the parson hesitated, then he lifted his hand and—*tore the beard aside!*

"You fools!" he shouted. "But for this meddling cur, I would have deceived you all! You thought me Parson Prince, but I am Red Hand, the Marauder! I have returned from the dead!"

CHAPTER III.

THE DYING OUTLAW.

BACK from the dead!

In truth it seemed the famous outlaw had arisen from the grave and stood before them. Many of them had looked on Red Hand's face as he lay dying and unmasked at their feet, and they were filled with astonishment as they gazed at the features revealed by the removal of the false beard.

It seemed that the same man was again before them, living and well.

"Dad-burned ef it hain't ther Red Han'!" howled Spotted Dan, the cowboy, making a break for the door and dashing straight against Frank Crapston, in his haste to get out. "Leetle ole thunder—*waugh!*"

Both men rolled on the floor.

Like a flash a brace of revolvers appeared in the hands of the acknowledged outlaw, and he opened fire, yelling like a fiend.

In an instant the room was in confusion and began to fill with the smoke of burned powder. Some tried to get out, while others attempted to get at the false parson. To add an additional terror to the scene, the shrieks of women arose, and it seemed that some of them were struck by the flying bullets.

What was that?

Outside a wild yell arose—the cry of many voices in unison! Then there was a rattle of fire-arms and shouts as of contending men!

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked the man who claimed to be the Red Hand. "My jolly boys are here!"

"Ther boys aoutside have been 'tacted!" shouted Old True Blue. "Great gosh all hem-lock! w'at a 'tarnal, all-fired scrape this is!"

In the excitement that followed, the Red Hand broke through the line that was closing around him, and leaped out at the open window.

"After him!" shouted Hurricane Hal, having fired a single shot, which rendered his derringer useless till it was again reloaded. "Don't let that veritable devil escape! If he gets away now, it will be a disgrace!"

He followed the outlaw through the window, leaving Kate and Sylva in each other's arms.

Outside a savage battle was raging, but the cowboys were getting the worst of it, for they were outnumbered by the masked riders.

At the appearance of their chief the outlaws cheered wildly.

"Hooray fer Red Hand!" was the cry that went up.

A horse was ready for him, and he flung himself into the saddle.

"I am with you, boys!" he cried, his head bared and his curling black hair glistening in the sunshine. "They are not able to down the Red Hand!"

"Long live the Red Hand!"

"Teach the fools a lesson!" commanded the chief. "Give them all the lead they want to chew!"

But Old True Blue, Zeb Horn and others came pouring from the house, and the wavering cowboys rallied. Maverick Mat had snatched a revolver from the hand of a fallen man, and used it with the effect of bringing down one of the bandits.

Hurricane Hal kept his eyes on the chief, but, unconsciously, the Red Hand placed himself beyond several of his men.

The battle was brief, for the outlaws quickly whirled and fled, having nothing to gain by fighting longer. Round the corner of the building they wheeled, and thus were protected for a moment from the fire of their enemies.

The cowboys followed closely.

"Drop the chief! drop the chief!" shouted Hurricane Hal, his black eyes blazing, his nostrils dilated with the scent of battle. "For Heaven's sake, don't let that human devil escape!"

The bandits had planned their retreat well. From the back of the ranch-house they sought the protection of some trees, and then soon passed over a swell and rode toward the timbered ravine from which they had issued.

"Great snakes!" burst from the lips of Old True Blue. "Ther whelps are all goin' ter get off, by gosh!"

"Not all o' 'em," returned Old Zeb. "They hev left two o' their men abind."

"Only one. T'other was picked up by one o' his pards."

Hurricane Hal was leading, but he suddenly whirled and threw up his hands as he faced the men, his voice ringing commandingly:

"Stop! We cannot follow them like this! They are getting away. Every man go for a horse! We will give them a hot chase!"

He did not stop to think of his attire; his only thought then was of the prospect of running Red Hand to earth. The men wheeled toward the stables.

"By ther 'tarnal!" puffed Old True Blue, "these am queer doin's! Ef I didn't know Sleek Saul wur dead, as well as ther Red Han', I'd call'that critter as played ther parson wur Saul hisself!"

But, no one paid any heed to his words. Every one seemed intent on getting a horse and pursuing the outlaws.

A surprise was in store for them when they reached the stables—a disagreeable surprise. The horses were there all right, but every bridle had been cut and slashed till it was useless for immediate use.

"Ther whelps hev fixed us!" snarled Zeb Horn.

"Who did this work?" demanded Hal.

No one answered.

"There must be a traitor in our midst!" exclaimed the young foreman, his dark eyes searching every face. "Otherwise this work could not have been done! Who is he?"

"It will be easier to ask than to find out, I fancy," spoke Maverick Mat. "It is plain enough a traitor has been at work, but, how are we to nail him?"

"I will find a way, sooner or later!" declared Hal. "And then let him look to himself! Dog that he is, he shall suffer for this!"

"Right, boyee!" asseverated Zeb Horn. "We'll twist his neck ef we do find out who he is!"

"Let some of the men go to work at once to repair these bridles," ordered Hal. "Do not be too particular how the work is done, so long as it is good and stout. Lose no time about it."

He named some men for the work, and the others left the stables to look after their wounded friends. In front of the ranch one of the outlaws was found lying face downward. Three of the cattlemen who were outside of the building had been wounded, but none of them fatally.

As Hal bent over the outlaw the latter uttered a low moan and stirred slightly.

"He hain't dead!" exclaimed Old True, who was keeping close at the boy's side.

Hal knelt and gently turned the fellow over. He was not dead, but his minutes were numbered. The young foreman saw this at a glance.

Stripping off his coat, Hal folded it and placed it beneath the sinking man's head.

"Water!" gasped the poor fellow, faintly—"water!"

"Give me your flask, father," said Hal extending his hand. "Keep the men from crowding about and shutting off the air. It may be of the utmost importance to hear the words that will come from this man's lips. When he understands he is surely dying, he may confess everything."

Old True passed the flask to Hal and then made the others stand so the faint breeze, sweet with the perfume of flowers could sweep across the face of the poor wretch so soon to breathe his last.

"Here, mate," said Hal, softly, holding the liquor to the wounded man's lips, "drink from this. It will give you more strength than water could, and a little strength will last you to the end now."

The man swallowed some of the fiery stuff, and an immediate change in his condition was noticed. His eyes brightened and his breathing became more regular. He looked around in a dazed manner, asking what had happened.

"You are shot," explained Hal, intending to convey by his manner how serious the wound was.

"Shot!" gasped the outlaw, from whose face the mask had fallen away. "Yes—I am shot! How bad?"

"Bad enough."

"Is there no hope?"

Hal shook his head.

The outlaw was not more than twenty-one or two—scarcely more than a boy—and his face was not that of a ruffian, by any means. It was plain drink and evil companions had led him to his doom.

"No hope!" he whispered, a wild terror filling his blue eyes. "My God! must I die?"

With sudden strength, he reached out and caught Hurricane Hal's hand.

"Must I die? Oh, I cannot die! I am not ready to die! It is such a terrible thing!" his voice sinking and his eyes rolling. "It is such a terrible thing to die with a load of sin on one's soul! And so sudden—so sudden! Oh, is there no way to save me? There must be! Please save me! Give me another year—a month—a week! I can get to my poor old mother in a week! That is all the time I will ask! I can

die if I am able to see her once more! My dear old mother! *I must have a week!*"

His voice rose to a wild cry—a cry for life. Those who have never listened to such a despairing appeal from the lips of a dying person cannot imagine how it affected the listeners. It struck to their hearts.

"My poor fellow," came softly from Hal's lips, while Mat stood a little aback, his arms folded and tears in his eyes—"my poor boy, I am not able to give you an hour. If I could—"

"But, tell me, can I not hope for another week? Tell me the truth! I shall see it in your eyes—your honest eyes—if you try to deceive me. Is there no chance for me?"

Hal averted his head.

"My God!" cried the young outlaw. "You do not speak! You turn your head away! I am dying—dying! I feel it creeping over me! And I am so wicked! Mother, mother! you warned me—you told me of my father's weakness! I have followed in his tracks! Never again shall I see your dear old face—never again! Oh, heavens! the thought is horrible, horrible! Mercy, good Lord—*mercy!*"

He writhed in agony of spirit, his bodily pain being forgotten, so great was the pain which tortured his soul. His face was contorted with the intensity of his suffering.

Old True touched Hal on the shoulder.

"Quiet him daown, boy—quiet him daown, ef ye want ter pump him!" he whispered. "He is jest shortenin' his own time! Tell him so."

The foreman's hands grasped the twisting outlaw, and Hal spoke steadily, softly:

"You are cutting short the thread of life by your struggles, my friend. Every turn you make means so many seconds less. You cannot afford that, for you want time to atone as far as possible for your wrong steps. You can give us some information that will be of importance."

The dying man sunk back, panting for breath, despair written on his face.

"Atone!" he gasped, with a great effort. "If I only might! There is no such a thing as atonement now! Even if I were to live, I would be past redemption!"

He suddenly grew very white, catching his breath convulsively.

"Give him more likker, lad," urged Old True, in Hal's ear. "Laively, ef ye don't want ter see him croak b'fore yeou git er word aout of him!"

Again the flask was held to the dying man's lips, and again it gave him strength, but he lay back on the coat, looking pale and still, his restless eyes alone revealing the turmoil within his soul.

"Now look here, my friend," spoke the young foreman; "you know your minutes are numbered and you have not much time for talk. Do not waste a breath, but tell us just what the meaning of the attack on this ranch was. Why was the trick worked?"

A single instant of hesitation was followed by the low-spoken words of the doomed man:

"It was the orders of the chief if his identity was betrayed by any means. That enabled him to escape."

"But who is your chief?"

"The Red Hand."

"I know he calls himself that, but Red Hand is dead and buried. I saw him die, and I helped bury him, so I *know* the man cannot be the original Red Hand."

The dying man looked Hal fairly in the eyes.

"You are mistaken," he declared. "The chief is the original Red Hand. I have heard those who belonged to the old band talking it over, and they say there is no doubt about that point. He claims to be Red Hand, and he says it was another who died in his place."

"That is impossible, for I heard Red Hand's confession before he died, and it leaves no doubt in my mind but he was the rightful one."

"And he says it was his brother Saul, who died in his place and was buried. He says his brother declared he was the true Red Hand, but he only did so when he knew he must die and saw that was the only way to save Red Hand himself from hanging."

"But that story cannot be true, for the second brother was hanged and riddled with bullets twelve miles south of Silver only six days ago. He became food for the wolves, and in no manner could return to life. The story is false; somebody is deceived."

"He—was—*Ah!*"

Once more the poor fellow was convulsed, and for some time he was unable to speak. When he was quieter, Hal saw his minutes of life had been reduced to seconds, and he made haste to say:

"Never mind about the chief now, for it is plain the man is deceiving his own followers. His career will be brief. What we wish to know most is who is the traitor in our midst. Is there one?"

"Yes."

The reply was scarcely audible to Hal as he bent with his ear close to the dying fellow's lips.

"Who is he? Speak quick!"

The doomed man lifted himself, gasping for air, and Hal held him up. Then, after, one wild glance around, he whispered:

"The—traitor—is—is— More air! He—is—*Mother—my mother!*"

With the cry, he started from Hurricane Hal's arms, sprung half to his feet, as if to greet the one whose name he spoke, then fell back, to be caught and lowered to the ground by the two cowboys.

After peering into the white face for a moment, Hurricane Hal slowly arose to his feet, a solemn look on his face, standing in his shirt sleeves before those around him, as he lifted one hand toward Heaven, saying:

"He is dead! Judge not that ye be not judged. His soul is in the hands of One who doeth all things well."

CHAPTER IV.

GONE!

DIRECTED by Hal, some of the cowboys lifted the dead outlaw and bore him into the ranch-house. There they found Sylva and Mrs. Horn attending to the wounded.

"Where is Kate?" asked Hal.

No one seemed to know.

"She was with me till after the outlaws were driven away," asserted Sylva. "I have been so busy since that I have not had time to look for her."

"She may be in her room," said Mrs. Horn; "though I don't jest understan' w'y she hain't here."

Nor did Hal understand that. It was not like Kate to go to her room when she could be of service, leaving the others to care for the wounded. The foreman shook his head, as he spoke, somewhat anxiously.

"Will you be kind enough to ascertain if she is in her room, Mrs. Horn?"

The woman saw the anxious look that passed over his face, and, of a sudden, she remembered the ominous forebodings of her child. Kate had dreamed Lieutenant Cranston came to warn her of danger, and her dream had come true. The deserter had risked his life to warn her. Would it end there? Was the danger past?

The rancher's wife started for the door, but her strength suddenly forsook her, and she staggered into a chair. Hal was instantly at her side.

"What is it, Mrs. Horn—what is the matter?" he asked, bending over her.

"I don't know," was her faint reply. "I feel powerful sick like at my heart. Ye don't reckon anythin' c'u'd 'a' happened ter my leetle gal—my Kate?"

"Oh, no; surely not. Do not give yourself any unnecessary alarm, Mrs. Horn. She is all right."

"But I hain't jest so sure o' thet, Hal. She dreamed—she dreamed o' all this trouble! She knowed it wuz comin' all ther time! It may be suthin' has happened ter her! Ef thar hes—Send somebody ter see—*quick!*"

The foreman turned to the Irish maid.

"Norah."

"Yis, sor."

"Go at once to Miss Kate's room and ascertain if she is there."

"Yis, sor."

Norah hastened to obey; and at this point a rather florid-faced young Irishman came forward, hat in hand.

"May it plaze yer Honor," he said, with deference, "Oi think the young missus will not be found in her room."

Hal wheeled toward him.

"What do you mean, Mike?"

"Now don't be afther lookin' at a poor divvil loike thot!" exclaimed the son of Old Erin, starting back. "It's me narves thit be a troifle onstiddy from th' recent excitement."

With a single stride Hal advanced far enough to clutch the other by the collar.

"What do you mean?" he repeated, sternly. "Why do you think Miss Horn will not be found in her room? Speak out, before I am tempted to shake the truth from your lips!"

"Och, hone! Whut hiv Oi ivver done thit yees sh'u'd use me afther this manner, Oi'd loike ter know? Yez fingers are afther takin' the shoolder off me! Murther an' guns!"

"Speak out, you rascal!"

"Will yez give me jist a bit av toime? Oi do not think Miss Horn wint to her room."

"Why don't you think so?"

"Because Oi saw her going in another direction intoirely."

"In what direction?"

"Torruds th' back av the hoouse."

"When was that?"

"Joost afther thim divvils wid masks cooverin' av their faces turned tail an' took th' schip, begorra!"

Hal started, his face paling.

"And they went around the house!" he muttered. "It can't be she has fallen into their hands in any way! No, no! Was she alone, Mike?"

"Nivver a bit."

"Ha! Who was with her?"

"Oi only saw the bark av him, if you plaze."

"But, you knew him! Who was it, man?"

"Well, it hid th' look av th' lootinant, if you plaze."

"The lieutenant?"

Hal started, a strange look passing over his face. Up to that moment the lieutenant had remained forgotten by all. Now it was seen that he had disappeared.

At this juncture Norah came hurrying down the stairs, her usually flushed face looking very pale. All turned to her.

"The missus is not in her room," she declared.

A cry broke from Mrs. Horn's lips.

"Oh, my poor chile—my leetle gal!"

Zeb was at the side of his wife.

"Don't ye worrit, Betsey!" he urged. "Kittie is all right. She is about somewhere, an' we will easily find her, I reckon. It's no use gittin' all worked up over nothin' a tall." Then he turned and gave the word that the premises be searched for the missing one.

Hal had grasped Mike by the arm, and now he commanded:

"Lead the way! Show me where you last saw Miss Horn!"

The frightened Irishman obeyed.

A search of the ranch building and surroundings failed to reveal the one who was sought, much to the consternation of the searchers. Zeb Horn seemed dazed when he was told his child could not be found, while his wife was thrown into hysterics.

"Great gosh all hemlock!" mumbled Old True Blue, looking helplessly around. "Ther Ole Boy has bin ter work, by smoke! I'm darned ef this hain't about ther worst scrape I wur ever in, an' that's facts!"

As for Hal, his lips were compressed and his eyes blazing. Every bit of color had left his face till his features seemed chiseled from a block of marble. Only the fire in his eyes told of the fury within his soul.

A pock-marked cowboy came forward, hat in hand.

"I reckon thar's some sniggery goin' on hyer," he ventured. "This hyer business looks ter me like er derned trick of some kind."

"What do you mean, Spotted Dan?" demanded Maverick Mat.

"Wal," said the fellow, slowly, "you all know ther leftenant wuz kind o' stuck on Leetle Kit, an' ef it hedn't 'a' bin jest as it wuz—*waal*—ahem—thet is—"

Hurricane Hal's hand fell on the speaker's shoulder, and the foreman's glowing eyes made the cowboy quail.

"Speak out, Spotted Dan!" came sternly from Hal's lips. "Say jest what you mean?"

"Good Lawd, boss! I don't mean nothin' a tall!" asseverated the startled herder. "Great ginger! w'at er grip them fingers of yourn has got!"

"You insinuated something, Dan," declared the foreman, still keeping his hand on the shoulder of the squirming man. "It is useless to deny it. Say what you started to, or it will be the worse for you! If you have a suspicion, out with it."

The cowboy hesitated, but dared not disobey.

"Wal, I lowed it might be a trick, boss."

"A trick?"

"Yep."

"What kind of a trick? I do not understand."

"A trick ter steal ther gal. Thar's more in ther hull blamed business than thar shows on ther surface, bet yer boots!"

"And you think Cranston in it?"

"W'y not, pard? He wuz clean stuck on Leetle Kate, an' but fer you, I reckon she'd 'a' hed him. She did keer—"

"Stop! Never mind that! You think Cranston has carried off Miss Kate?"

"Ef she didn't go with him willin'ly—yes."

Of a sudden Hurricane Hal's clinched fist was drawn back, and it seemed as if he would smite the pock-marked cowboy fairly in the face. Fury was written on his countenance, and his aspect was that of an aroused lion.

Spotted Dan crouched and whined:

"Easy now, boss! Dern it tall! W'at's ther matter with ye? I hain't done nuthin' w'y you sh'u'd hit me! Don't ye do it, boss—*don't!*"

Slowly Hal lowered his hand and his fist unclosed, while the look of contempt crossed his face.

"You are not accountable for your words," he said. "All the same, I give you warning it will be well for you to guard your tongue when speaking of Miss Horn, and guard it closely. If you dare make another insinuation about her—" He finished with a gesture that was very expressive, and Spotted Dan shrugged his shoulders.

Turning from the cowboy, Hal advanced to where Mrs. Horn was sitting in a chair, wringing her hands and wildly calling the name of her child, Zeb standing by as if dazed, and Sylva doing her best to comfort the stricken mother. Kneeling, the handsome cattleman took the poor woman's hand.

"Listen, Mrs. Horn," he said, solemnly, "I swear by all I hold dear to restore your child unharmed to your arms! If life and strength are given me, I will sift this affair to the very bottom, and the guilty shall suffer! Depend on me! I will not fail you in your hour of need!"

She reached out her trembling hands and

placed them on his head, tears running down her cheeks.

"Hal," she said, brokenly, "I will trust ye. You are brave an' strong an' noble, an' I know ye will keep yer word of ye kin. Ther fate o' my pore leetle gal is in your han's—an' God's!"

CHAPTER V.

TRICKED.

As Hal arose to his feet, Mat grasped him by the hand, saying earnestly:

"I am with you, pard; with you to the end!"

The foreman gave his old comrade a strong grip, speaking swiftly:

"I knew I could depend on you, Mat. We must be away at once. Already the wretches have a big start on us."

Little time was cut to waste in making preparations for the pursuit. Under Hal's directions, everything moved forward with dispatch.

Still Zeb Horn seemed dazed. Old True Blue tried to arouse the rancher.

"Come, ole man, wake up!" he cried, slapping Zeb on the shoulder. "Stir yerself, an' git red dy fer ther chace. We'll be orf in abaout two shaiks."

Zeb made an attempt to obey, but every motion was mechanical. It seemed as if his brain was befogged.

"Git yer guns, Zeb, fer we are goin' a gunnin'," urged Old True. "Lead 'em clean ter ther muzzles. Thar'll be grait shootin' b'fore long."

He dragged the old fellow around as if he were a child, and Zeb permitted the Trusty to do whatever he pleased.

Although she seemed crazed by what had occurred, Mrs. Horn had more energy left than her husband.

"Wake up, Zeb Horn!" she exclaimed. "Your gal is gone—they varmints bev kerried her erway! Are you goin' ter let 'em git clean off 'thout tryin' ter foller?"

"No, no, Betsey," mumbled the rancher, starting suddenly. "I'm goin' ter foller! Yes, I be! Pore gall pore leetle Kit!"

Old True Blue dragged Zeb out of the house and assisted him to mount a horse.

In a short time the pursuers were ready, the damaged bridles having been repaired after a fashion. Hurricane Hal was still in his shirt-sleeves, and Mat wore the suit in which he was to have been married. But both cowboys had taken good care to thoroughly arm themselves. Just as they were about to start, Norah came running out with a coat, which she held up to the foreman.

"Heur, me b'y," she cried, anxiously; "it's takin' av this coat ye'd better be afther. Yez will nade it."

With a word of thanks, he took the coat: but he did not pause to put it on then.

"Are you ready, pards?" he called, turning to his companions.

"All ready," was the response.

Then he gave the word, and, with a wild cheer, the party rode away, Hal at the lead, still in his shirt-sleeves. Straight down toward the ravine they headed.

Old True Blue forged ahead until he was at his boy's side.

"Be yeou goin' ter try trailin', Hal?" he asked.

"That is our only way of pursuit, father."

The Trusty glanced anxiously at the sun, which was slipping slowly down the western sky.

"We hain't got none too much of daylight left," he muttered.

Hal heard and understood.

"I know it," was his confession. "That is what troubles me. They can travel under cover of darkness, while we shall be obliged to lay by and wait for morning."

"But we'll run 'em daown, boy!"

"We will!"

"Do you think it possible that wur ther Red Han?"

"I know it is not possible."

"So do I. But, who wur it?"

"It must have been the Marauder's twin brother, the gambler."

"Nary darned bit, boy! I tell yeou he is dead as hay, an' that's facts! I saw him hanged."

"But was there no slip?"

"Nary slip. They literally filled him full of bullets arter he wur hanged up ter dry, an' ter cap it all, he made food fer ther wolves. On, no, lad; don't ye never think Sleek Saul will trouble ye ergain!"

"Well, there is a mystery about it I do not understand. All the same, I mean to solve it sooner or later. Just when we thought this section clear of lawless organizations, this new band of outlaws springs up. They shall be wiped from the face of the earth!"

"As ther t'other ban' wur b'fore 'em. Naow yeou're shoutin' business, Hal."

Down into the ravine went the trailers, and there Old True took the lead. The trail was plain enough to follow at a gallop, for the outlaws had made no attempt to conceal it there. Keeping well under cover of the timber at the

bottom of the ravine, it ran eastward till it debouched on the open plain some miles away.

"Ten ter one they are strikin' fer ther Mimbres!" muttered the Trusty, lifting his eyes to the purple peaks far ahead. "Any haow, it looks that way abaout naow. Ther fu'st Red Han' hed a retreat in ther Mimbres; mebbe his successor'll try ther saime racket."

Hal said nothing. His lips were compressed and his face stern. Now and then he glanced anxiously over his shoulder toward the declining sun.

One of the cowboys, whose peculiar gait made him known by the appellation of Wobbly Walt, rode forward to Hal's side.

"I say, boss."

"Well?"

"I notiss Spotted Dan hain't hyer."

"Well, what of that?"

"Thet critter's p'izen!"

"What are you driving at?"

"He's er powerful bad galoot ter leave ahind."

"And a worse to take along. We are well rid of him."

"But ther ranch! Thar hain't much of anybody thar 'cept him an' ther wimmin folks."

"Mike Maloney is there."

"An' I reckon he is 'bout ther only honest one of ther lot."

Hal turned and looked Wobbly Walt fairly in the face.

"Look here," said the foreman; "I don't know as I understand you. You have been quite thick with Spotted Dan in the past."

"Thet's right, boss; but I hed an objee', you bet! I wuz kinder pumpin' ther critter ter see w'at he wuz made of. I never took ter him over much, an' I 'lowed he wuz er sneak. Fer thet reason I jest got in kinder thick with him ter find out."

"And what did you discover?"

"Nary darned thing. He wuz mighty keeful. All ther same, I don't think no more of him."

"Well, you may be mistaken about the fellow. He is a good worker."

"I 'low thet; but he don't like you."

"How do you know?"

"I hev heerd him say so. You didn't git ter heur jest w'at he meant ter say w'en he spoke of ther lieutenant an' Miss Kate, fer you skeered him out of it."

"Think so?"

"I knows it. He made ther talk ter me arterwards."

"What did he have to say?"

Wobbly Walt hesitated, casting an inquiring glance toward the foreman. Hal's eyes were still reading the fellow's face, and once more the chief of cowboys impatiently demanded:

"What did he have to say?"

"Ye won't lay it up erg'in' me, boss?"

"No; speak out."

"Wal, he 'lowed Miss Kate keerd more fer ther lieutenant then she duz fer you, fer all thet she guv him ther shake. He 'lowed she wuz powerful sorry she ever done thet, an' thet wuz w'at made her look so sad. Then he went on ter say he knowed well ernough ther lieutenant wuz in ther parson racket, an' he hed taken thet way ter break up ther marriage."

Hard lines formed around Hurricane Hal's mouth and a dangerous light blazed in his dark eyes.

"Anything more?" he harshly demanded.

Wobbly Walt started and reined his horse a bit further away.

"Wal, he did say some more, but—"

"Out with it, man, out with it! You need have no fear! You are simply repeating the words of another. Spotted Dan will have to answer for them. Speak up!"

"Wal, he 'lowed ther bull racket wuz planned ter guv Cranston er chance ter git erway with Miss Kate. More then thet, he said he reckoned Miss Kate wuz glad of it an' went willin'ly with him."

The teeth of the listening cowboy nearly met in his under lip, while he lifted one hand to his heart, as if he felt a sharp pain there; but not a sound escaped him.

"Dan reckoned this pursuit of ther outlaws wuz all er wild goose chase," Wobbly Walt continued; "fer he 'lowed ther garl wuz not with 'em a tall. She hed gone off with ther lieutenant, so he said."

"Well, he is a fool!" deliberately declared Hal. "The great trouble with Spotted Dan is that he talks too much with his mouth. It will get him into trouble some day."

"Wal, I hopes ye won't think none ther wu'st of me fer tellin' ye w'at he said. Thet is all."

Hal waved his hand, and Wobbly Walt fell back.

Old True Blue had overheard the most of what had passed between the two, and he was quickly at Hal's side.

"Don't yeou take er darned bit of stock in that stuff, boy," he advised. "Kate is er good gal, an' she keerd more fer yeou then fer fifty leftenants."

"And still, father, she has acted very strangely during the past week."

"Hsow?"

"Well, the nearer the time for our marriage

approached the more sober she has grown. Instead of becoming happier, I have fancied I saw a sad light in her eyes many times, and she has been moody and silent. I have not understood her."

"That wurn't nuthin', boy—that wurn't nuthin' but one of ther ways er feemale acts at times. You're young yit, an' yeou don't know much about wimin. W'en yeou git older yeou'll larn they be ther all-firedest sing'ler annimiles that ever growed. They have so menmy whims an' whiffles that an ordinary common ev'ry-day man find hisself in hot watter two or three-thirds of ther time ef he tries ter understand ev'ry crook an' twist that strikes 'em—that's so, by gosh! One minnit they'll be cryin' an' sniffin' an' yeou don't know whut in Halifax is ther matter with 'em. Mebbe yeou'll feel like cussin' ev'ry darned thing black an' blue, an' afore yeou begin ter git right daown ter cussin' in dead 'arrest they'll be larfin' ter split an' huggin' of ye tell yeou can't ketch yer breathe. That's facts, by ther jumpin' jeeswax—yes it am!"

"But I have not told you all, father. Sometimes when I would try to approach her as of old she would repulse me—she seemed to have a positive aversion for me."

"'Nother whim, boy! Yeou see she wur thinkin' of gittin' married an' all it meant ter her. It means a heap sight ter some gals, though it don't mean much ter others. A gal with plenty of brains in her upper story don't jump inter marriage 'zif it wur of no consequence, naow I tell yeou. They think, an' think, an' think. They know it means er pile, an' they feel they be makin' ther gravest step of ther life. That wur what's ther matter with Leetle Kit."

"It is possible; and still she may have felt she was making a mistake. Her feelings may have changed toward me since she promised to be my wife, two years ago."

"All of that is 'mebbe so,' Thar hain't nuthin' fer sart'in—nary darned thing!"

"But I cannot keep from thinking, father."

Old True grunted.

"I cannot help imagining she may have been thinking of the lieutenant—she may have been regretting her refusal of him. For her sake he fought the duel that made him what he is. She knows that, and it may have wrought a change in her feelings."

"Bosh, bosh, bosh! Yeour head is all full of that kind of stuff, but yeou'll git it aout bye an' bye."

"The trail led straight toward the Mimbres, but, with increasing uneasiness, Old True noted that now and then one of the outlaws had branched out from the others. For some time he said nothing of this, then he communicated the fact to Hal.

"What do you think of it, father?" asked the young man.

"I think ther critters are tryin' ter git us ter foller some of these side tracks so they kin split up aour party an' make it as weak as possible."

"Well, we can easily avoid that."

"Mebbe so. But thar's ernother trick they'll be workin' b'fore they're done."

"What?"

"Them that is left will all spread ter oncet w'en they reach er favorable spot fer splittin' ther trail in that way."

"What shall we do then?"

"What kin we do? Thar is only one thing, an' that may not be any good."

"What is it?"

"Foller one man."

"You think—"

"He may lead us to the retreat of ther varmints; he may not. That is jest whut I think. An' ther chances aire thet he won't."

The Trusty was right in regard to the intentions of the outlaws. When a favorable section was reached the trail spread out like a fan, each man of the pursued taking an individual course. The trailers halted in dismay.

A consultation followed, but the result was anything but satisfactory. Half-a-dozen plans were proposed, but none of them seemed to just meet the emergency.

"What was to be done?"

It had seemed as if the outlaws were making for the eastern range of the Mimbres, but of this they could not now be certain. Perhaps the course up to the point where the trail spread out had been laid with the intention of deceiving pursuers—indeed, it was quite probable such was the case.

Zeb Horn had aroused himself in a measure from his dazed condition, and the delay filled him with impatience. He little knew of the fire which seemed raging in the veins of Hurricane Hal, for the cowboy did his level best to keep himself in restraint, aided by the words of Maverick Mat.

And all the time the sun was slipping down, down toward the Gila Mountains, which thrust their peaks upward far beyond the Arizona line. Night was coming on, slowly, surely.

At length it was decided to follow one of the trails. In fact, that was the only thing reasonable they could do. So one was selected and the trailers moved onward once more.

Down, down slipped the sun, till it was lost beyond the distant peaks, then night came on.

Just as it was growing dark one of the men happened to look back along the trail and espied a horseman who seemed to be following them.

"I wonder ef thet critter is from the ranch," said Old True.

The man was too far away for them to tell if they knew him, but they fancied he was trying to overtake them, so they halted.

On, on came the horseman, but the shadows gathered with remarkable swiftness, and they were still unable to make out who he was. When he was still some distance away they heard him shouting and urging his horse forward.

"We can go no further to-night," said Maverick Mat. "Let's turn back and meet this person, whoever he is."

The curiosity of the men was aroused, and in a moment they were riding back along the trail.

In a short time the horseman was at hand, and it was seen the animal he bestrode staggered as if on the point of falling. Before he reached them the horse did fall, but the rider landed safely on his feet, being prepared for the tumble.

In a moment he was racing toward them, hoarsely shouting some broken words.

By this time every one of the party felt that something was wrong at the ranch—something of which they did not know—and, mounted on his magnificent black horse, Hurricane Hal was the first to reach the man's side. Leaping from the saddle, he caught the fellow by the shoulder, crying:

"Mike, is it you?"

"Yis," was the gasping reply, "it's meself—nighly did!"

It was the Irishman, Mike Maloney.

"What is it, Mike?" cried Hal—"what has happened?"

"Ah, wurra, wurra! Th' divvil is to pay!"

"Speak, for Heaven's sake!"

"It's Satan's own thrick! Th' little gel wur not kerried away at all, at all!"

"Not carried away?"

"Niver a bit."

"Impossible!"

"An' it's not. She wur hid in th' cellar."

"In the cellar?"

"Yis."

"How came she there?"

"Begorra! she wur dhragged theer by th' divvil's own servints, so she wur! It's Shpotted Dan as wur at th' botthum av it all!"

"Spotted Dan?"

"Thit same thife av th' worru! Wan av th' min wur wid him in th' game—Spikey Joe. He wur in th' cellar all th' toime, an' he made th' little gel kape schtill. They wur hid down theer somewhur, an' whin ye wur gone they kem up."

"Ah!"

"By thit toime Shpotted Dan hed given th' worru to some more av th' divvils as wur hid somewheer in the vacinity, an' th' whole passil an' coot kem down on th' hoose."

"Great Scott!"

"Oi an' Humpy Smith wur th' ounly wans thit wur theer to defend th' place. Humpy wur no good at all, at all; but Oi did me livel bist, so hilp me. It wur a roight schmart bit av a ruction we hid, but Oi wur laid out in th' ind wid a clip over th' hid."

"What then?"

"They toied me han's an' fate bafore Oi c'u'd git me levil, thin they hid their own way, may th' divvil floy away wid thim! It's th' missus they nighly kilt whin she troied to protect her choild, so it is! They knocked her doown at l'aste three toimes bafore she couldn't git up."

A cry of fury broke from Zeb Horn's lips.

"They shell pay fer every blow with blood!" he shouted.

"Thit is not all!" continued Mike. "They raked through th' ranch fram th' top to th' botthum, an' they took ivvery blissid thing they c'u'd lay theer han's on thit they wanted. They made Norah, me own Norah, show thim wheer ivverything wur, so they did! An' afther thit—oh, merciful hivvins!"

"What, what? Speak out, man!"

"They kerried off both av th' gels!"

"To horse!" thundered Hurricane Hal, "to horse, every man! We have been tricked by these devils! Our way lays back to the ranch. Come on!"

One minute later the entire party was spurting toward the Red Spur Ranch.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FATE OF THE FAIR ONES.

WHEN the outlaws attacked the cowboys outside the ranch, Kate Horn found herself deserted by Hal, who had pursued Red Hand through the open window.

She turned to Sylva, and a few words passed between the girls.

But Little Kit had not forgotten Lieutenant Cranston, who had put himself in such peril on her account. True, the man was a deserter, with the blood of a fellow-officer on his hands, but she felt as if she were in a great measure responsible for it all.

And the deserter-lieutenant was in danger. She must do something to get him away."

Just then her eyes fell on Cranston, approaching. In a moment she was at his side.

"Oh, what made you come!" she cried.

"They thought you had left this part of the country, and now they will know you are in the vicinity. You will be hunted down! What made you come?"

"I came for your sake," was his reply. "I came to save you, and I have succeeded. Now I am satisfied."

"But you must go away—at once! No time is to be lost! While they are fighting outside you can make your escape. When the battle is over, you will be gone."

"It makes little difference to me whether I escape or not. What have I to live for?"

"Don't talk like that!" she exclaimed, catching his hand. "Follow me, and I will show you the way to escape."

"My horse—"

"You can not go for him. You would be seen and shot down like a dog! In some way I will get you another horse. Trust me."

She led him toward the back of the building, and he did not regret to follow, for he might obtain a minute of privacy with her—the one he still loved with all the strength of his passionate, wayward heart.

At the back door she paused, her hand on his arm.

"You must give me a promise," she said, her blue eyes looking into his. "You must promise me to go far, far away and never come back here to this place. Will you?"

He shook his head, looking longingly down upon her. He seemed to forget his danger, and neither of them appeared to hear the yells of the contestants at the front of the house or the rattle of shots.

"You ask too much, Kate—Miss Horn," came from his lips. "I am unable to give such a promise."

"But you must promise!"

"It would be useless. I would break my word. If not of my own free will, then I might be captured and brought back to this section. No, I cannot promise."

A look of pain marked Little Kit's face.

"Oh, what made you come at all?" she cried, once more.

"I came because I love you!" burst passionately from his lips. "I came to save you from those who were plotting your ruin! There is more than one. I dare not call any names, for you would misconstrue my motive; but I will tell you now to beware of the one in whom you put the most trust. He may be dashing and handsome—he may seem brave and noble, but you cannot read his heart. Why should any man want a false marriage performed unless his motive is villainous? Why should he—"

"Stop, Frank Cranston! Not another word like those just uttered. I will not listen to them. I understand your insinuation, and I know you wrong a true-hearted man. You will cause me to utterly lose my respect for you, so have a care."

"All right; I am dumb. All the same the day may come when you will know I tell the truth. If you ever need a true friend, Miss Horn, you may depend on me. All I possess—my very life is at your disposal!"

"Enough! I will not forget. Go, go, go! You must not remain longer."

He caught her hand and kissed it. At that moment his horse, being frightened by the battle, came dashing round the house. The deserter-lieutenant uttered a shrill whistle, and the trained animal instantly turned toward its master.

"Good-by, Miss Horn!" cried the man, and a moment later he was in the saddle, riding swiftly away.

None too soon.

Round the corner came the retreating outlaws, but Frank Cranston had already secured a good start, and they would find it impossible to catch him if they tried.

As Kate turned back into the house she felt herself clutched by strong hands, and a muffling blanket was thrown over her head. She uttered a stifled cry, but it was not heard above the medley of other sounds. The one who sprung upon her lifted her and bore her along. She gasped for breath—seemed smothering. She strove to shriek, but was unable to do so. Everything seemed whirling round and round, bright lights flashed before her eyes, the ringing of bells sounded in her ears—then came oblivion.

When the unfortunate girl became conscious again she found she was in a cold, dank place, where the light of day did not penetrate. She wondered where she could be, and what had happened, but when she tried to speak she was unable to do so.

A gag was in her mouth!

Then she struggled and tried to tear it away, but in this she failed.

Her hands and feet were bound!

Her struggles seemed to arouse some one who was crouching at her side, and a hoarse voice hissed in her ears:

"Keep still, gal, an' ye won't be hurted none

ter speak of! It won't do ye er derved bit of good ter squarm an' twist, fer ye is trussed up ter stay."

She recognized the voice as that of a cowboy known on the ranch as Spikey Joe.

What did it mean?

In vain she asked herself the question. Was Spikey Joe her enemy? and, if so, why? She had used all the cowboys kindly, and, in turn, they had treated her with courtesy. She would have given much at that moment to be able to question Spikey Joe.

Listening intently, she heard sounds above—heard her own name called many times. The cowboy at her side chuckled with satisfaction.

"They're huntin' fer ye, gal," he whispered, and his whisky-tainted breath fanned her cheek. "They're huntin', but it'll be er powerful long while afore they finds ye. He! he! he! Thet leetle game wur worked powerful slick, I sw'ar!"

Again Kate tried to free herself of the cords which bound her, for now she knew she was in the cellar of the ranch. Oh, if that gag were only removed from her mouth for a single moment! One scream would bring friends to her rescue.

It seemed as if Spikey Joe read her thoughts, for he softly growled:

"It hain't nary bit of use, gal; you can't git erway, an' thet gag's putt thar ter stay. We do business in business style, we do! We hain't blamed fools enough ter let ye hev er chance ter squawk an' bring theer dogs down onter us, fer we thinks too much of our hides, we do! Never you mind w'at kind of er racket we be playin', ef thet bothers yer noddle any. We knows our biz, you bet!"

She saw his eyes gleaming in the darkness, and it filled her with terror. What horrible deed did the man contemplate? She remembered what a repulsive face the man had, and in the gloom she imagined it was ten times more repugnant. She felt that he was gloating over her.

The sounds above continued. Why did they not come into the cellar?

Hark! Somebody was coming!

Her heart leaped into her mouth, and again she tried to scream—tried till it seemed as if her head would burst.

And then she felt a hand on her throat—felt the tip of a keen knife as it pricked the skin. In her ear hissed a shaking voice:

"Derved ef they hain't comin'! Ef you don't keep still, I'll give you the length of this yar knife, so help me Bob! I've got ter keep ye still now, ur hang!"

Would they be found? Somebody was in the cellar, and she heard them moving about. They called her name twice. Oh, if she could only reply!

A ray of light shone in upon her, and then she knew she was in a corner behind some barrels and boxes. She would not be found there. Her heart sunk.

Whoever it was in the cellar, they did not remain long, for they were easily satisfied the one they sought was not there. She heard them going away, and her very soul was filled with despair. Making a strong surge, she struck her feet against the barrels. At this not a sound came from the lips of her brutal guard, but his fingers closed on her throat with a suffocating pressure. Her breath was shut off and she felt she was strangling. Once more things swam around her; once more the lights flashed before her eyes and the bells sounded in her ears; once more unconsciousness gave her relief.

She was insensible much longer than before, and when she was coming to she heard the sound of quarreling voices.

"Ef you have killed her, Spikey, it'll be er mighty bad job fer you," declared one. "Ther boss will snuff out your candle in er powerful short time. Not thet he keers in 'ticle fer theer gal, but he is workin' fer revenge. All theer same, she is er howlin' daisy—you heur me!"

"Wal, I hed ter do suthin'," growled the voice of Spikey Joe. "Critter wuz in the cellar, an' she wuz kickin' up er bobbery. It meant hang ef I was cotched, an' I hain't reddy ter shuffle off yit. I want ter live er dite longer. Fer thet reason, I bore down on her thrapple er leetle."

"An' made er blamed fool of yerself! One is bad as t'other, fer ther boss will fix ye!"

"I dunno's she's dead. Don't you go fer ter call me er fool 'less ye wants yer head punched!"

"You can't punch it, derved ef ye kin!"

At this juncture a third voice broke in:

"Hyer, hyer, you two blazin' idiots! Thit hain't no time fer quarrelin'! Ther gal's comin' round. Tend ter biz! We hev knocked theer Irishman over, an' he's theer only one we feared. Work lively! Sweep theer ranch fram top ter bottom. We must be off in less than thirty minutes."

Kate opened her eyes and looked straight into the pock-marked face of the last speaker—Spotted Dan!

"Ah-a, my purty!" grinned the rascal, rubbing his hands together in a foxy fashion. "So you are all right! Good! We will be movin' in a short time."

Kate tried to speak, but only a few inarticulate sounds came from her purple lips.

At this moment Mrs. Horn broke into the room, crying:

"My leetle gal—my pore child! whar is she? Ef you hev hurt her, you monsters, you shell suffer fer it!"

"Look out fer her!" ordered Spotted Dan. "Keep her away!"

A masked man sprung forward to obey, but Mrs. Horn grasped a chair and knocked the wretch over with it.

"Out of ther way!" she screamed. "Don't dare git atween me an' my child!"

At her heels came Norah, the Irish maid.

"Give it to th' spalapeens!" she shouted, wildly flourishing a broom. "Hurro! Knock th' hids av thim off! Auld Oireland feriver!"

With a savage snarl, Spotted Dan leaped forward, caught the chair, wrenched it from the hands of the crazed mother, then struck her a blow that sent her reeling to the floor!

"Tie her fast!" he commanded.

Some of the masks hastened to obey, but, Mrs. Horn gave them a desperate battle before they succeeded. In that she was aided by Norah, but even the strong Irish lass was overpowered and made helpless.

Lying helpless at one side, Mike Maloney saw all that passed, but could only gnash his teeth and rave with anger and despair.

Sylva was already a captive.

Having subjugated the place, the marauders searched for plunder, forcing Norah to show them where to look; but the crafty Irish girl remained true to her employers; only revealing the hiding-places of the articles of least value.

The outlaws were not satisfied with their raid, and they showed their anger in various ways.

Spotted Dan had a grudge against Mike, and the pock-marked rascal proceeded to kick the helpless Irishman to his heart's content.

"May th' divvil floy away wid yez!" grated Mike, glaring at the traitor-cowboy. "Oi always knew yez for a snake, an' nivver a bit av a mistake did Oi make at all, at all. Kick av ye will, but th' day will coome whin Oi'll be aven wid yez, now mark th' worrud av me! It's not always th' under dog Oi'll be, an' whin Oi hiv yez foul, ye will be sorry for this, me b'y!"

"Ha! do you durst threaten me now?" snapped Dan.

"Durst! An' did yez think Oi'd be 'feared av the loikes av you? Begorra! it takes a marn to skeer Mike Maloney, will yez mark thot noow!"

Dan flashed out a knife and dropped with one knee pressed on Mike's breast, the blade uplifted.

"Say yer pra'rs!" he grated, the fiend showing in his eyes. "I am goin' ter guv ye the length of this! Beg, you dog, beg!"

Mike did not quail.

"Nivver a beg, ye divvil!" was his defiant retort. "Oi w'u'dn't beg av you to save me loife! Strike av ye will! Oi will doie loike a marn!"

Something like admiration passed over the ruffian's face, and the knife was slowly lowered.

"Hanged ef you hain't got clean grit!" he muttered. "That is all thet saved ye. If you had begged, I'd gi'n ye ther knife."

He arose and turned away.

Under directions of Spotted Dan, the girls, Kate and Sylva, were carried from the house and bound upon the backs of horses. Each of the fair ones had been forced to drink two or three swallows of fiery liquor. On Kate the stuff had wonderful effect, for her strength was quite gone till it passed down her throat.

"Be lively!" ordered Spotted Dan. "We want er good start afore any critters kin git on our trail."

"Thar hain't much danger of our bein' folered b'fore another mornin'," said one of the men. "Z-b Horn an' t'others are many miles away now."

At length everything was ready for the start.

"Shell we set fire ter ther ole box, Dan?" asked one of the men.

"No!" shouted the traitorous cowboy. "Are you crazy, Smike? Do you want ter call ther hull onery gang back ter strike our trail? Nuthin' 'd do it quicker then settin' ther ranch afire. Hev er leetle boss-sense, man!"

Within another minute the outlaws were riding away, and in their midst went Kate and Sylva, helpless captives, borne to what fate?

CHAPTER VII.

THE DESERTER'S DARING.

WESTWARD from the Red Spur Ranch the outlaws struck, but before they had gone many miles, they turned northward toward the Upper Gila. Striking the river, they moved up its course toward the mountains in which it has its source. Before nightfall they had entered the mountains, but they did not halt for at least three hours after sunset.

The section into which they pushed was wild and desolate, but the shadows hid the surroundings through which the party passed. But few words were exchanged. From out the mountain passes came icy breaths which cut the flesh and made it seem improbable that the day had been hot and sultry.

Tired, unnerved and despairing, the poor girls would have fallen from their horses but for the cords which held them on. They were sick at heart and filled with despair. Not many hours before they were standing at the side of the men whom they loved and believed would be their husbands in a few moments; now they were separated from those men in a most cruel manner, and the marriage ceremony had not been performed. Almost at the very instant when the false parson would have pronounced the final words of the ceremony, the villainy of the wretch was exposed.

It seemed like a dream—a black, horrible dream. Could it be true? It did not seem possible Fate could be so cruel. And yet—All they had to do was look around. On every hand were the dark figures of the outlaws on their horses; the steady tramp of iron-shod feet sounded in their ears; on either hand loomed the dismal mountains.

To what fate were they being carried? At first the question did not trouble them, for their thoughts were about what had occurred—their thoughts were of the ones they loved. Oh, if Hal and Mat only knew of their trouble! How swiftly the two handsome cattlemen would wheel to their rescue! But the outlaws had planned their black work well, for when one scheme failed, they at once set about carrying out another. The men of the ranch had been led in the pursuit all through a trick. The guests had hurried away to their homes, taking their wives and daughters. Then the bandits had struck their second blow.

It was plain Red Hand had fancied he might fail to make the people of the Red Spur believe he was a minister of the Gospel sent in the place of Elder Jones, so he had arranged things for the emergency, should it arise. While the excitement was at its height, the two treacherous cowboys, Spotted Dan and Spikey Joe, were to carry away one of the girls and conceal her in the cellar. It was plain the girl's friends would believe she had been kidnapped by the outlaws, and the result would be an immediate pursuit. Then the second blow was to be struck.

This plan proved wonderfully successful.

After entering the mountains, the outlaws turned from the river and plunged into the wildest region, taking some pains to cover and blind their trail. It was not far from midnight when they halted.

Spotted Dan uttered a few sharply spoken words, and immediately the girls were taken from the horses to which they had been made fast for such a long time. The relief was painful, and they could not stand at first.

"Kerry them in," commanded the pock-marked rascal.

Obedient to the command, the maidens were lifted and borne into a cavern.

Little Kit scarcely noticed anything, but Sylva's dark eyes were taking in everything. The girl still felt the hot blood of the Utes flowing in her veins, and she was not ready to give up in despair. The civilizing influence she had experienced had not robbed her of her natural shrewdness and courage.

For some distance the girls were carried along after the cave was entered. At length they were put down.

"Now you gals keep still," spoke a harsh voice. "We'll build a fire hyer in er minute ter warm yer bones."

Neither of the maidens offered to stir, for both felt a hand resting on their shoulders. Meantime, one of the men moved about in the darkness as if he were preparing something. In a few moments he struck a match, and the tiny blaze revealed him in the act of lighting some dry bark, upon which were piled twigs and sticks of wood.

"Blow it, Pete," advised the one who was guarding the girls.

The other took the advice and blew so hard he extinguished the tiny flame.

"Diddly-dern yer blowin'!" he growled, striking another match. "I reckon it's best ter let things take their nateral course."

But the fire did not readily blaze up.

"Blow easy, pard," spoke the one with the girls, once more.

"Come blow it yerself ef you know so derved much 'bout lighthin' a fire."

Number two did so, and a bright blaze soon sprung up, throwing out a grateful warmth.

"Now, gals, warm yer bones," spoke one of the men. "You must be powerful chilly in them thin dresses."

It was a strange sight to see the two maidens as revealed by the firelight, for they were still dressed in their bridal garments, although the dresses, which had been so beautiful and spotless a few hours before, were torn and soiled in many places. Little Kit saw the evil eyes of one of the men turned gloatingly upon her, and she shrank away, shuddering with fear.

"You needn't be skeered," the fellow growled. "I hain't goin' ter tetch ye, 'cause it's ag'in' orders. But ef it wuzn't fer orders—"

He finished with a look that nearly turned the poor girl's blood to ice. She realized the full horror of their position. The men were lawless and brutal, having all the finer instinct of humanity utterly banished from their hearts.

But for orders—but for fear of the man they called captain, the two girls would have fared badly in their hands.

"Oh, let up, Jed!" snapped the fellow who had succeeded in lighting the fire. "Can't ye see ye are skeerin' ther gals."

"Wal, they must be derved easy skeered."

"I durno 'bout thet. It'd skeer 'most any-thin' ter hev ye gawk at it in thet way."

"You be blowed."

At this the other laughed.

The girls were glad enough to warm themselves by the fire, and the outlaws seemed to enjoy the heat. One of them filled a black pipe and lighted it, while the other solaced himself with a huge chew of tobacco.

"S'pose mebbe we'll hev some fodder bumby," growled Jed.

"Jest as soon as things kin be 'tended ter. Some o' ther boys hev got ter look arter ther hosses, an' others hev other things ter do. I 'lows we be farin' as well as any. This is ther softest job of ther whole."

"Oh, I hain't kickin'."

"I thort you wuz."

"Nary time."

The men stretched themselves on the ground and gazed at the fire, now and then allowing their glances to wander toward the two girls, who crouched with their arms about each other. The fire danced and crackled and the light threw fantastic shadows on the black walls.

Thus the time slipped away till at last half-an-hour had passed, and then the other outlaws began to come in. Spotted Dan paused long enough to say:

"Everythin' hes bin 'tended ter, an' now we're goin' fer suthin' ter eat. You fellers will be relieved as soon as ther men hes putt some grub inter 'em."

Then he went on and disappeared in the darkness.

Perhaps thirty minutes passed, and then the two guards were relieved, two other men taking their places.

"You fellers kin go eat," said one of the newcomers. "We'll be in better comp'ny. If thar's any blamed thing we do like, it's ther sersiety of leddies, eh, Smike?"

"Bet yer boots, pard!" grinned the one called Smike.

"Wal, you critters be keerful how ye look at ther girls," growled Jed, turning to depart. "Pete, byer, he w'u'dn't let me look 'em over a tall. They're powerful slick pieces, all ther same!"

Sylva felt Kate shiver at these words, and the dark-eyed maiden whispered an encouraging word in her ear:

"Don't mind them, dear!" she said, softly.

"They will not dare harm us. If they try it—Well, I have a dagger in my bosom. You know I always carry one concealed there. It is the Indian of my nature to want a deadly weapon where I can grasp it at all times. They did not find it, and I think it may yet serve us a good turn."

Kate made no reply just then, but later, when the original guards were gone, she whispered:

"Yes, Sylva dear, the dagger may do us a good turn, for with it we can take our lives in preference to meeting dishonor. Do not let it pass from your possession. We may have to use it!"

"There, there, Kittie!" was the soft return of the dark-eyed maiden. "Do not let your thoughts run in such a channel! We shall not have to use the blade for any such a purpose, for we are going to escape or be rescued."

"Your courage is good, Sylva; but courage alone will not save us. We must have aid from friends who are far away."

"How know you they are far away? Even now they may be close at hand."

"It is impossible."

"Why impossible?"

"Because you told me they started in pursuit of the other party, and of course they have been led on a false scent. It is plain the whole thing was craftily planned, and at this moment our friends may be a hundred miles from us."

"Something may have happened to let them know the truth."

"What could happen?"

"Word may have reached them from the ranch."

"How could that be? The wretches bound every one securely, even to poor mother. Single-handed she fought them, but they knocked her down and secured her. Even Norah did not fail to show her courage, but she was also made secure."

"But Mike—"

"Was also made a prisoner. They left him bound hand and foot—secure and fast."

"He might break away."

"A dozen times he tried with all his strength, but his efforts were unavailing. Some one will have to release him."

Their position seemed hopeless, but Sylva was not ready to despair. She believed there was hope so long as life lasted.

"Heaven will not allow these wretches to triumph!" she whispered, encouragingly. "Remember the past—remember the dangers through which you passed in safety. Many

times you were crushed with despair, but it all came out right in the end. Why should it not come out right this time? You have taught me villains must be defeated in the end—you have taught me virtue should always be triumphant. Can it be you have forgotten your own words?"

"No, no; I have not forgotten. It is true that almost always villainy is defeated in the end, but of course there are exceptions to this as to everything else. This case may be an exception. These men may triumph."

"And I am sure they will not. Have you lost confidence in the man you love?"

"No, no!"

"And yet it seems so. He will leave nothing undone to save you, and my king will be at his side! They are both grand and noble! They are both men! They will face a hundred deaths to save us! Oh, who could help loving such men!"

Sylva's enthusiasm stirred Little Kit's blood, and a faint tinge of color came into the fair cheeks of the ranchman's daughter. She thought of the one she loved, and she knew he would soon come to her rescue like a whirlwind, if only he knew the road to follow. In her mind's eye she could see him charging down upon the outlaws like a tornado, his eyes blazing, his teeth firm set, a speaking revolver in either hand. The mental vision caused her to thrill with delight.

Then her thoughts turned to the other—the dashing, hot-blooded lieutenant. What would not that man risk for her sake? He was handsome and manly, and a limit could not be put upon his courage. His hot head had led him to rashness that in the end might prove his doom. She pitied him and felt she would do anything in her power to aid or protect him; for had he not dared the most deadly dangers in her behalf.

The two guards settled down to smoke, having spread a blanket for the girls to recline upon. The fire had been replenished, and it crackled and burned merrily. Clinging close together, the maidens whispered of their lovers, finding it impossible to sleep. In this way some time passed before food was brought for them.

Sylva was ready to eat, but Kate protested she could not swallow a mouthful. However, the dark-eyed maiden succeeded in inducing her companion to partake of a small amount.

"It will do you good," she declared, in a low tone. "You must keep up your strength, for there is no telling when you will need it. If our friends should reach this place by morning, you must be strong enough to return to the ranch."

Kate smiled, sadly, faintly.

"I have little hope they will be here by morning. You should know it will be impossible for them to follow the trail in the night."

Sylva did know it, but she wished to keep her friend's courage up in some way. She was pleased when she succeeded in getting Little Kit to swallow a small amount of the coarse fare.

Having eaten and drank, the girls once more stretched themselves on the blanket. Again they whispered of their lovers, and both forgot their surroundings for a time. They spoke of marriage and the happy life they expected would follow, but both seemed to know wedded life was not all wedded bliss; both seemed to know there would be shadows as well as sunshine.

"For which the sunshine will seem all the sweeter," whispered Sylva, her dark eyes glowing. "I am willing to endure the shadows that I may taste the sweetness of the sunshine."

Kate gazed at her companion admiringly, wonderingly.

"I have never yet been able to understand you, Sylva," she declared.

"And why not?"

"Because you are so strange, so unlike a person in whose veins there is Indian blood! Sylva, I don't believe there is a drop of Indian blood about you!"

The other laughed softly.

"Oh, yes, there is!" she asserted. "I can feel it at times. Once in a while I have a wild inclination—a sort of savage turn that I know is the Indian nature in me. I crush it down and keep it in the background, for I have determined to be civilized."

"Civilized! You were always that! When we first met, you were more civilized than I."

"Oh, no, no! you do not mean that!"

"But I do. You could speak English more correctly than I at that time, and you have aided me much in improving my language."

"While you have aided me in a hundred other ways. I could speak English because my father spoke it correctly. He was a singular man for a red-man, and if I am odd, it must be because I take after him."

"I think so."

"He was not ashamed of the Ute blood in his veins, but he was ashamed of the degradation into which his people had fallen. He saw the pale-faces were far in advance of them, and when he learned to love a pale-face captive, the course of his life was changed. Never did I hear the story from his lips, but when he was dying he told it to Mat."

"It was plain he intrusted you in Mat's care."

"Mat has told me he swore to Soft Foot, when my red father was breathing his last, he would be a true friend to me. He told Soft Foot of his love, and my father gave me into his care, as you have said."

"His judgment was not at fault."

"No. My father was a reader of men, although he was not versed in the books of the pale-faces. The captive whom he loved he saved from his people, and she became his wife, for she learned to love him. She was educated, and had she lived Soft Foot would have been known as an educated red-man. As it was, she taught him much; but she died at my birth. How much better it might have been for me had she lived!"

"You might not have met Mat."

A strange look passed over Sylva's face.

"That is true," she said, slowly. "Still I do not believe we would have been kept apart if we were intended for each other. In some way he would have come to me."

Thus the girls talked for hours, and the night slipped away.

The guards took turns at watching their fair captives, one sleeping while the other remained awake and smoked.

Neither of the girls could sleep, although both tried to do so.

It seemed morning could not be far away when the girls and the watching guards were startled by a stealthy sound toward the entrance to the cave. The man dropped his pipe and sat up, his hand falling on a revolver, while he glared into the darkness beyond the light of the fire.

"Did ye hear anythin', gals?" he asked.

Sylva promptly replied:

"Something that sounded like a rat. Are there rats here? I am dreadfully afraid of them."

"Thar hain't no rats as I knows of," he replied, arising to his feet and thrusting the brands of the fire together so they blazed up more brightly. "Reckon I'll go see."

Still the other guard slept soundly.

Picking up a blazing firebrand, the fellow advanced along the passage, while the girls held their breath.

What had made the noise?

"It may be our friends have come?" whispered Kate, her spirits rising with remarkable swiftness.

Sylva scarcely thought it possible, but she spoke no word. Both watched the man who was slowly moving along the passage, the blazing brand held above his head. On and on he went, peering from side to side.

What would he find?

Suddenly, without the least warning sound, a dark figure darted from behind a boulder, caught the man by the throat and knocked the firebrand from his hand. Then both men went to the floor in a desperate struggle, and the firebrand was extinguished.

Kate came near uttering a scream, but Sylva's hand was pressed over her lips. When the torch was extinguished they could no longer see the two men, but they could faintly hear the sound of the struggle.

Who had sprung upon the guard?

Who would be the victor in the struggle?

Those were the questions the girls asked themselves, and each moment they feared the other guard would awake and hear the sounds of the conflict, faint though they were. Sylva prepared for that. From her breast she drew the slender dagger and knelt above the sleeping man, the blade uplifted, ready for a quick stroke.

Kate caught her friend's wrist.

"What would you do?" she whispered, horror written on her fair face. "You would not kill him?"

"If he sleeps—no; if he wakes—yes. Take your hand from my wrist! It is for our lives and honor!"

Little Kit fell back and awaited the result, her heart in her mouth. She shuddered when she looked upon Sylva with the uplifted knife, and then she covered her eyes with her hands. If the man awoke, she did not wish to witness the fatal stroke.

The seconds seemed minutes, the minutes hours. The sound of the struggle in the passage became fainter and fainter. Would it never cease? Every moment there was danger the outlaw would break the grip of his antagonist and utter a shout that would alarm his comrades.

At length there was no longer any sound to be heard. Then Kate lowered her hands and looked into the darkness. Several moments passed; then she saw a man advancing cautiously toward them. The fire flared up, and the light revealed the form and face of the deserter-lieutenant, Frank Cranston!

CHAPTER VIII.

BRAVE LITTLE KIT.

LITTLE KIT came near uttering a cry of amazement when the firelight revealed the man who had overpowered the outlaw in the passage,

for her thoughts had been of her handsome lover, Hurricane Hal. It was Hal she had expected to see, and her disappointment was as great as her surprise.

The ex-flier paused when he saw that he was recognized.

"Come!" he whispered. "Follow me!"

Sylva immediately arose, but she was forced to assist Kate to her feet, as the latter's strength seemed to have quite deserted her.

"Be brave!" she whispered. "Be strong! Our time has come! We will escape now!"

The girls quickly joined the daring deserter, but no words passed between them then. Grasping their hands, he led the way through the darkness, taking care they did not stumble over the body of the outlaw lying in the passage.

Kate was trembling from head to foot with excitement and fear, but Sylva seemed wholly calm and composed. The presence of danger or the requirement of nerve seemed to make her cool and deliberate.

They all knew how great their peril was, for at any moment the sleeping outlaw might awake and find them gone. Then he would instantly arouse the cavern.

Hastily, yet with a certain amount of caution, Frank Cranston led them onward. He seemed to know the ground well, but that was because he had taken special pains to note the lay of the land when he crept into the cave an hour before.

It seemed to Kate that they were hours in reaching the open air, but in truth they spent only a few minutes in such a manner. When they were outside the cavern, the deserter-lieutenant drew a breath of relief.

"We will give them some fun if they catch us now," he said; "if we only had a horse each, we could bid them defiance. As it is—"

He paused and seemed to be thinking. What was to be done? Glancing at the sky, he saw morning was not far away. Whatever was done must be done speedily. No time was to be lost.

"We must have horses," he declared, speaking rapidly. "One horse is not enough, for we would be run down without trouble. I know where the outlaws have concealed their bronchos, and I can get two of them here in a short time."

"But you will not leave us here?" gasped Kate. "If it is discovered we are gone—"

"No, I will not leave you here. I will place you where you will not be discovered, if possible. Come."

He led the way and they followed. For ten minutes they moved onward, and then he paused by some bushes that grew at the base of a ragged bluff.

"Here," he said, parting the bushes, "creep in here and keep still till I return. I will be back as soon as possible. Trust in me."

They crept into the bushes, and he drew the branches together so the girls were fully concealed. Then he left them, having again promised to return as soon as possible.

For some moments they were silent, but at length Sylva said:

"Though he be a deserter, Frank Cranston is a brave man."

"You speak the truth," confessed Kate. "I am sorry for him, for he should not be the hunted thing he is. He was cut out for a position of honor, but there is that in his nature which has dragged him down. Worst of all, I feel as if I were in a measure responsible for his downfall."

Sylva passed her arm about her companion's waist.

"You should not feel that way, Kittie," she protested. "It is not right."

"But I cannot help it. And now he has again put me in debt to him! Oh, why was it not Hal who came to our rescue? Day by day I feel as if my obligation to Frank Cranston is growing stronger and stronger. What can I do to repay him for all he has done for me—what can I do?"

"A brave man asks no repayment of any favor he may bestow on a woman, so Frank Cranston will demand nothing."

"Still I shall be in debt to him. Oh, Sylva, Sylva! what am I to do?"

The dark-eyed maiden was surprised at this appeal, but she fancied it came from the fact that Kate's nerves were quite unstrung.

"Do not bother your head with this matter now," she urged. "We are not yet out of danger. The time may come when you can make some repayment."

"I trust I may. He and Hal have always been enemies, but never have I heard Hal speak one bitter word against Frank Cranston. Not so on the other hand. Frank has sought to turn me against the man I love. But for that one thing, I might think much more of the man who has ventured so much for my sake."

"And you should overlook that in a measure, Kittie. Frank Cranston loves you, and he sees you in love with another. Is it strange he should be jealous? No, no! Perhaps he is not as generous as he should be under the circumstances, but he is as generous as his nature will allow."

"But for Hal—"

She stopped abruptly. What was she saying? No, no! she did not mean that! If Hurricane

Hal were not in the field, Frank Cranston could be nothing to her.

"I thought you did not mean what you started to say," whispered Sylva, seeming to read her companion's thoughts, although the darkness hid the faces of both. "One man you love with all your heart; the other you feel indebted to. It is possible you admire both, but you cannot love both."

"You are right," came slowly from Kate's lips. "You seem to understand my feelings better than I do myself. How is it you read my heart so well, Sylva?"

"Are you not my sister? It almost seems as if we had one heart. You have been more than a sister to me, Kittie, and within the past two years I have studied you and learned to understand you. Now we are in great danger—"

"Yes, yes! For a moment I had almost forgotten our peril. Will he secure the horses?"

"If it is possible to do so, he certainly will. Mounted and with a good start, we can bid defiance to the outlaws. Oh, Kittie girl! we are going to get away after all! And not long ago you were ready to give up in despair! I told you to keep up your courage."

Little Kit drew the dark-eyed maiden closer and kissed her.

"I know you did," she confessed. "You are always right, dear sister. Your hopefulness is never crushed, and your spirits are always buoyant. What would I do without you?"

Filled with hope, the two girls hugged each other again and again.

"We will see our lovers soon!" whispered Kate, with delight. "But for these wretched outlaws, they would have been our husbands now."

"What a terrible night it has been! I pray to God I may never experience another such a night!"

They lay waiting for the return of the lieutenant. Birds were beginning to chirp in the brush, and the eastern sky was growing lighter. The stars were fading before the approach of another day.

"What if he does not come?" Kate asked the question, her heart in her mouth.

"He will," was Sylva's firm reply. "Nothing but death can make him fail us now."

"But he must come soon. It is a wonder the outlaws in the cave have not discovered our absence before this. If they should—Hark!"

To their ears came the sound of distant shots, three of them in quick succession.

"Oh, what does that mean?" gasped Kate.

"It means that Frank Cranston has run upon some of the outlaws," calmly replied Sylva.

"And he has been shot!"

The words were fairly wrung from Kate's lips, and she felt a great wave of horror surge over her. The thought that the man who had risked so much for her sake might now be lying dead or dying nearly crushed her. In her mind she saw him stretched upon the ground, his life-blood staining the sod, his strong heart forever stilled. She would have shrieked in anguish, but Sylva seemed to read her thoughts, and a soft hand was pressed over her mouth.

"Do not scream!" warned the dark-eyed maiden. "He may not be hurt at all. Don't lose your head, little sister!"

Kate was trembling from head to foot, but she repressed the desire to utter a cry. Still she clung to Sylva and sobbed convulsively, saying:

"He is killed! he is killed! I am sure of it, and I am the cause of it all! Oh, I shall never, never forgive myself!"

"Now you are showing yourself a foolish girl," declared Sylva, firmly. "In what way would you be the cause of it all? You have done nothing but decline to become his wife. You could not have married both of these men, had you wanted to, so of course you chose the one you loved. Do be sensible, Kit!"

After a time, Sylva succeeded in quieting her companion, and they continued to await the return of the deserter-lieutenant.

The light in the east took on a rosy hue, and the songs of the birds became louder.

Suddenly the ring of iron-shod hoofs was heard. The girls peered from the bushes, then a glad cry burst from Kate's lips:

"He is coming! he is coming!"

It was now light enough for them to see him, and in a moment both had left their place of concealment. Cranston was soon at their side, and as he sprang to the ground, he cried:

"Not a moment can be lost! The whole outlaw band will be aroused in a moment! The horses were guarded, and I got a bullet through my sleeve as I rode these animals out of the corral."

He quickly helped them upon the horses, and then he mounted his own good beast. They were forced to ride without saddles or bridles, but they did not mind that then. They were ready to do anything to escape. With his lariat he kept the horses "in tow," as it were.

"We must go directly past the mouth of the cave," he declared, as they started. "To turn back means to run upon the guards who were watching the horses."

Along the ravine they dashed, the light of coming day growing stronger with each passing moment. When they approached the mouth of

the cave from which the two girls had been rescued, Frank Cranston drew a revolver and held it ready for use.

It was well he did.

Out of the cave came several men, each of them uttering savage exclamations of fury, which told they had discovered the escape of their fair captives. They saw the approaching riders, but barely did they make the discovery when the deserter opened fire with the weapon he held.

By good fortune more than skill, his first shot sent a man reeling backward into the arms of a companion, and that threw the entire party into confusion. Before they could recover, the trio had dashed past.

However, they were pursued by mounted men, two of the guards at the corral having started after the horse-thief, as they supposed Frank Cranston to be. They appeared just as the three dashed past the cave.

"They are hot after us," said the deserter, coolly, as he glanced over his shoulder. "It is plain they mean to give us a hot chase. Well, I had my pick of the horses, and I fancy we are good for them. Anyway, we will—Hello!"

Several bullets whistled past, but fortunately, none of them did any damage. A moment later a bend in the ravine carried them beyond sight of pursuers and the astonished men who had emerged from the cave.

"They are not going to lay their hands on us now," declared Cranston, firmly. "We have given them the slip for good, as they will discover directly. As soon as they can mount, pretty nearly all of them will be after us, but they will have to pursue us straight into Silver if they hope to catch us."

"But for you, we would still be in the power of those wicked men," came earnestly from the lips of Little Kit. "Again you have done me a service I cannot forget."

For a moment his eyes were turned upon her, and her own blue orbs fell before his earnest look.

"I know I am selfish," he confessed, "and I am ashamed of it. My selfishness makes me hope you will not forget."

She said no more—she could not then.

The pursuers were not far behind, and they were soon in sight of our friends again. They uttered loud shouts, and the daring deserter turned in the saddle to wave his hand and fling back his defiance.

"If they crowd us, I will try them with my revolvers," he said.

"How in the world did you ever happen to find us in the cave?" asked Sylva, her curiosity overcoming her thoughts of danger. "How did you know we were in the hands of the outlaws?"

"That is easily explained," was his reply.

"When I left the ranch in the height of the battle I retreated to the higher land to the westward of the buildings. From that point, aided by my field glass, I watched the retreat of the outlaws and saw the party that started out in pursuit. I also discovered some other men who seemed to be lying in hiding in some timber to the southeast of the trail that leads to Silver. Their movements aroused my curiosity, and I resolved to keep my eyes on them. I did so, and within a short time after the pursuing party left the ranch I saw them mount their horses and ride down on the buildings. Then I perceived they wore masks over their faces, and I knew there was more devilry afoot. I was tempted to ride down on the ranch and face them single handed, but my good judgment prevented, and I waited to see what would follow. I saw them carry you away, and then I followed on the trail. I was successful in trailing them down, but I came near not finding the entrance to the cave."

The explanation was simple enough, and it made plain the mystery of Frank Cranston's presence in the outlaws' cave.

Suddenly they rounded a bend in the gorge and came upon a scene that filled them with amazement. Before them was a bivouac of soldiers, and they were upon the encampment before they were aware of it. The Boys in Blue were just cooking their coffee over various fires.

The appearance of the man and the two girls created no little amazement, and the trio found themselves confronted by an officer, who cried:

"Hello, hello! What does this mean? Who are you?"

Then, having gazed searchingly at Frank Cranston's face, he shouted:

"By Heaven! It is Cranston, the deserter-lieutenant!"

Frank only paused to say to the two girls:

"You are safe with these men, but I must fly for my life. Farewell!"

With that, he gave his horse the spur and wheeled.

"Halt!" shouted the officer. Then he whirled to three men who had sprung to his side. "Shoot that man!" he cried. "He is a deserter! Shoot him down!"

The men lifted their carbines to obey, but Little Kit quickly urged her horse in front of them, crying:

"Shoot, if you will; but your bullets must pass through my body before they reach him!"

CHAPTER IX.

SAD SCENES AT THE RED SPUR.

BACK along the trail rode the men who had started out to run the outlaws down. Night had fallen, but as they needed no ray of daylight to guide them to the Red Spur Ranch, the already overdriven horses were urged to their best pace, and the heart of many a rider traveled even faster than the feet of the animal he bestrode.

A million stars twinkled in the great vault of heaven, and the soft breath of night was sweet with the perfume of wild flowers. Across the rolling plain, where silence usually slept undisturbed save by the mournful howl of the wolf or the hoot of the prairie owl, dashed the men who had been tricked and deceived by the cunning of the outlaw chief. The shadows concealed the look of stern determination upon their faces, but from the eyes of many a man gleamed the fire of fury burning within his soul.

Mike Maloney had been taken up behind one of the cowboys, and whenever the overburdened horse would begin to fall behind he would change to another without the loss of a moment's time.

"Oh, wurra, wurra!" he moaned. "It's Sathan himsilf as is hivin' a jubilee hereabouts, Oi balieve! But for thot Norah gel av moine Oi moight be loying at the ranch this blissid minute boound harud an' fut, begorra! It's thricked thim bloody pirates she did, Gard bliss her swate toongue! She made thim think they wur noighly killin' av her whin they troied ter boind her barns behoind her, an' so by fussin' an' foolin', they did not more thin half toie th' litttle darlint. It wur aisy she got away whin th' divvils wur gone, an' thin she rel'ased me."

"But you were a long time overtaking us," spoke one of the cowboys. "Why was that?"

"A long toime, is it? Begorra! Oi dhrove me horrus ter dith, as yez saw! It's in somethin' av a hurry yez wur yersilf, Oi'm thinkin'. Oi hid begun ter fear Oi'd not overtake yez at all, at all."

"You did your duty nobly, Mike," averred Maverick Mat. "You shal not be forgotten, rest assured of that."

"Oh, it is not worryin' Oi am on me own account," was the assurance of the sturdy little Celt. "But Oi am thinkin' how the mather will fale whin he r'aches the ranch. Och, hone! it makes me shick at th' stoomach, so it does! An' theer wur th' poor missus a-takin' on, loike she wur out av her hid. 'Moike, Moike,' sez she, wringing av her harnds, 'go fer th' mather, an' go loike death wur afther yez.' An' you kin bet Oi did thot same."

For a long time only the light of the stars showed them their course, but at length the moon arose above the eastern peaks and flooded the plain with light.

On, on rode the grim and determined men. Hurricane Hal spoke no word, and Zeb Horn was equally silent; but in the hearts of both were raging tempests. Old True Blue found it impossible to keep silent, and he relieved his feelings by muttering his favorite ejaculations, "by smoke" and "gosh all hemlock."

Mile after mile was left behind, but it seemed as if leaden weights were attached to the feet of the horses. The poor animals had already been cruelly driven, but, for the most part, their masters gave them no thought.

This was not true of the Trusty. He felt his noble horse trembling and heaving beneath him, and he knew the creature needed water and a short breathing spell. Giving the word to the men, the veteran of the mountains and plains swerved from a direct course and led the way down into a hollow, where he knew there was a spring that supplied water for the grazing herds. The others followed.

The spring was reached and the horses allowed to drink a small amount, although none were permitted to fully satisfy their thirst. The lips of their masters were dry and parched, but not a man thought of tasting the water of the spring. Old True Blue always carried a flask of liquor, and this he passed to Zeb Horn, who silently took a single swallow. The flask was then passed to Hurricane Hal, but the foreman declined it with a motion, still speaking no word. Maverick Mat also refused to drink, but the others all took a small swallow, and the flask was emptied when it returned to its owner.

Hal was for mounting and going on at once, but his father's hand fell on the young man's arm.

"Keep cool, lad!" advised Old True. "Yeou have got er 'tarnal good hoss thar, an' yeou don't want ter sp'ile it. Yeou'll need it ter foller ther p'isonimps as hev kerried orf ther gals ther sure this time. Don't let yer hot blood git ther best of yer good jedgment."

Hal threw out his hands in a despairing gesture, and then he covered his face with them, still remaining speechless. Something like a sob broke from the lips of the father, who idolized his handsome boy, and Old True's arm stole over Hal's shoulders, while he softly whispered:

"I know haow ye feel, lad! It jest cuts my ole heart ter see ye this way—yes, it does! It's too bad—too 'tarnal bad. Gosh darn them drat-

ted critters!" his voice rising in sudden wrath. "We'll make 'em haowl w'en we git aour claws on 'em! Don't yeou go ter losin' yer heart, Hal," and his words grew softer once more. "We'll save ther leetle gal, ur else we'll bu'st aour galluses tryin'! She hain't dead, an' while thar's life thar's er great big pile of hope. This tbing's goin' ter come aout all right, an' don't yeou fergit it, by gosh!"

Hal turned and took his father's hand, gazing into the old man's eyes. Their companions were watching, and every man held his breath. The foreman gazed in silence at his parent for a moment, then he placed his arms around Old True's neck, gave him a brief embrace and turned suddenly away.

Tears stood in the Trusty's honest eyes as Hal walked to the side of his horse and made a motion that signified he was ready to go on once more.

"Pore boy!" softly muttered the old man. "I'd 'a' g'in anythin' ter saved him frum this."

Meantime, Maverick Mat had been doing his best to cheer Zeb Horn. The light-haired cowboy was much more hopeful than Hal, and he succeeded in infusing a little of his courage into the parent of the kidnapped girl.

After a brief rest, the men went on again, making no other halt till the ranch was reached. When they saw Red Spur's lights gleaming in the distance, they urged their horses still faster, sweeping down upon it.

A shrieking, wild-appearing woman met them at the door. It was Mrs. Horn, and Norah, the Irish maid, was clinging to her dress.

"Whar's my leetle gal—whar's my babby?" screamed Mrs. Horn, waving her arms above her head. "Hev you brung back my Leetle Kit? Don't ye durst tell me ye hain't brung her back ter her ole mommy! Whar is she, I say? Don't ye durst tell ye don't know. Oh, my babby—my pore child. Them human wolves kerried her off! Hev ye brung her back? I mus' see my leetle gal—oh, I must!"

The men were appalled by the appearance of the rancher's wife. Even Old Zeb stared at her as if suddenly stricken dumb and motionless. Finding they did not speak at once, she cried again:

"Whar's my gal? W'y don't ye answer me? Don't ye try to deceive her ole mommy!" Then her voice sunk to a pitiful appeal. "Now, don't ye try ter keep her from her mommy! I want ter see my gal; I want ter look in her blue eyes! I know you hev brung her back ter me, so don't ye try ter fool me 'bout it. Ef you only knowed how my heart aches to see her, you'd putt her in my arms! See! and she stretched out both arms, "they are empty—so empty! My leetle babby hain't thar, an' right hyer in my breast is a pain that seems like it w'd kill! Please guv me back my babby! Don't fool with menow, fer it will kill me ef she hain't in these empty ole arms afore long! Oh, Kittie! my Leetle Kit!"

The appeal brought tears to the eyes of the rough cattlemen, and many of them turned their heads away. Norah was weeping hysterically, seeming unable to do a thing but cling to the dress of her mistress, and sob:

"Oh, musha, musha! Nivver did Oi expict to say th' black day loike this! S'int Patherick save us all!"

Hal sprang from his horse, and Mrs. Horn leaped eagerly forward, catching him by the arm.

"You hev brung her back, Hal?" she cried, gazing wildly into his face with her great, staring eyes. "I know you hev brung her back, fer ye said ye w'd! You alwus keeps yer word, Hal, so whar is my leetle gal? Can't ye see I'm nighly dead fer ther want o' my darlin', an' all I ax is ter look at her an' hole her in my ole arms fer one leetle minute! You may hev her then, fer you hev tole me ye love her. Whar is she, Hal? Tell me, quick, before I—before my heart bu'sts! It is so full, an' thar's sech er terrible pain thar! An' my head—it is ready ter split! Mebbe I'm goin' ter die, Hal! I feel so strange! Bring my gal ter me, quick!"

The foreman attempted to take her hands, but she snatched them away, screaming:

"No, no! Whar is she?"

"Mother," said Hal, softly, calling her that for the first time, "we will bring her back to you as soon as possible. You must trust in us."

"You'll brung her back?" gasped the woman, falling back and clutching at the side of the open doorway, her right hand pressed to her head. "You'll brung her back? W'y hain't she with ye now? You don't mean ter say you hain't brung my leetle gal? You can't mean that! You said ye w'd! You must hev kep' yer word! You hain't? Oh, my God!"

Flinging up her arms, she fell backward within the open doorway, striking heavily on the floor, and lying like one suddenly stricken senseless.

"She is dead!" shouted Zeb, suddenly aroused from the lethargy that had seemed to hold him powerless and speechless. "Betsey, Betsey! Great Heaven! she is dead!"

He leaped from his horse and sprang to the side of his fallen wife, dropping on his knees, gazing wildly into her face. Her wide open

eyes looked up at him, but she did not seem to recognize him.

"Betsey!" he gasped. "You hain't dyin'? What's ther matter with ye? W'at makes ye look at me in that way? Oh, Betsey, Betsey!"

Hurricane Hal lifted the woman and bore her to an easy-chair. She was breathing heavily, but she made no move to help herself. It seemed as if her strength had suddenly vanished, leaving her helpless as a child.

When Hal placed the poor woman in a chair, Zeb came staggering to her side. Kneeling, he grasped her hand, gazing into her face, as he spoke:

"Don't look thet way, Betsey! You skeer me! W'at makes ye? It will be all right by-'n'-by! Don't ye take on no more! Thar hain't a man o' all them boys but'd lay down his life fer Leetle Kit, an' they'll stan' by me tell she is safe back ter ther arms o' her own daddy an' mommy. Them devils tricked us, but we'll make 'em suffer fer it in ther end!"

She still stared at him in a singular way, not appearing to understand his meaning. She seemed like one dazed by a heavy blow.

"W'y don't ye speak, Betsey?" asked Zeb. "You don't say nothin'!"

The Irish girl was still hanging over the chair of her mistress, still sobbing.

Old True Blue had entered the room, and he gazed searchingly at the unfortunate woman, then he silently skook his head, muttering to himself:

"Great gosh all hemlock!"

Zeb Horn took hold of his wife and shook her a little.

"Speak!" he cried. "Say suthin', fer Heaven's sake!"

"Ha! ha! ha!"

The sound came from her lips, but there was no look of merriment in her face. Zeb fell back and put up his hands in horror, gasping:

"God above, she's goin' mad!"

"An' that's jest about whut I wur 'feared of," said Old True Blue, to himself.

Hurricane Hal was filled with horror, for he saw the light of reason no longer dwelt within the eyes of the poor woman. Her look and appearance was that of one deranged by a sudden shock.

"Oh, Hal, Hal!" cried Zeb, clutching the young man's hand; "can't we do nuthin' fer her—can't thar be nuthin' done? Thar must be!"

Hal was forced to confess he knew not what to do, and then Zeb appealed to Old True Blue; but the veteran shook his head, speaking solemnly:

"Thar hain't nuthin' we kin do that I knows abaout. She is in ther han's of God, an' ef he sees fit ter let her keep her right mind, all will be well. We must trust in Him."

Those around the unfortunate woman did what they could for her, but all their efforts seemed useless. She did not seem to understand them, and once in a while she would laugh in a manner that chilled the blood in their veins. Zeb broke down and cried like a child.

"This is too much fer me ter bear!" came brokenly from his lips. "Robbed o' my chile an' left er wife who hes gone mad! W'at hev I ever done thet I sh'd suffer all this? Is thar a God thet kin let sech things be?"

He was led from the side of his wife, for it filled him with agony to witness her strange looks and hear her wild laugh. Old True conducted him to another room.

For some time Mrs. Horn sat in the chair, speaking no word, only uttering that meaningless laugh now and then. She took no notice of those who were moving about in the room. Her eyes seemed to look straight through everything on which they were turned.

Maverick Mat came and stood by the side of his old-time pard, Hurricane Hal.

"Poor Mrs. Horn!" he said, softly. "Do you think her derangement is more than temporary?"

Hal shook his head.

"I do not know. Time alone will tell."

"She no longer calls for Kate."

"No; she seems to have forgotten her child."

"Forgotten—No, she has not! Listen to that!"

Rocking back and forth in her chair, the poor woman softly sung:

"Sleep, my babby, sleep,
Rest yer tired head;
Dream, my darlin', dream,
Angels guard yer bed."

It was the cradle-song she had sung to Little Kit when the girl was a child. How strangely it affected those who heard it coming from the lips of the deranged woman! She smiled and seemed to fancy she was hushing her baby to sleep. Those who saw her turned away, some to choke back a sob, some to dash the blinding tears from their eyes.

"That is the most pitiful sight I ever witnessed," declared Mat.

"She sings of sleep," said Hal, "and that is just what she needs. If she could sleep now, she might be all right when she awoke. If we only had a soothing powder to give her! Where is Doc. Jenks?"

"With the men outside."

"Find him and tell him what is needed."

"All right."

Mat promptly hastened out to find the cowboy known as Doc. Jenks. The fellow had some knowledge of medicine, having once contemplated becoming a physician and spent two years studying, at the end of which time he decided he was not cut out for that profession and abandoned his plans. However, his knowledge stood him in good stead in after years, and he found it convenient to constantly keep a supply of drugs on hand for use in cases of emergency. Among the cattlemen he had quite an enviable reputation as a "curer."

Mat had little trouble in finding the one he sought, and Doc. Jenks declared he had something that would soon put Mrs. Horn to sleep and would not harm her in the least. He mixed and administered the drug, having little trouble in inducing the woman to drink, and within ten minutes the unfortunate mother was sleeping soundly.

"God grant she may be all right w'en she wakes up!" was Zeb's prayer; and it was echoed in many hearts.

CHAPTER X.

HOT BLOOD.

LIKE a caged lion, Hurricane Hal paced a room within the ranch. He was eager to be away after the outlaws, but Old True Blue had convinced him it was folly to think of following the trail till it was light enough for them to see to do so.

Besides the impossibility—or impracticability—of following the trail in the night, the horses were jaded and their numbers not just what they should be in order to be sure of overpowering the bandits. Men had been sent to the two nearest ranches to secure reinforcements. In the morning the trail was to be taken and pushed hotly to the end.

Old True watched his boy, with anxious eyes, for he knew how Hal had been stirred to the very depths of his passionate nature by what had occurred, and he feared for the young man's self-control.

"He's got hot blood in his veins," muttered the Trusty. "He's suthin' like his mother wur b'fore him. A good boy—yes, he's a good boy; but he needs ther check-rein hitched 'tarnal tight sometimes. Naow he's tirin' hisself all aout walkin' an' walkin' all ther time. Whut he needs is ter rest, but I don't s'pose anybody c'd convince him of thet."

The old man approached Hal and laid a hand on the foreman's arm.

"Look heur, boy," he said with an attempt at sternness, "whut be yeou rampin' raound like this fer? Yeou ought ter berestin'. Why don't ye go take some sleep?"

"Sleep!" cried Hal, suddenly, facing his father. "Do you think I could sleep now? It would be an impossibility for me to close my eyes! Sleep! I can sleep as well now as I could if I knew I were to die in an hour! No, no; I shall not sleep till our work is done, or I drop in my tracks from pure exhaustion!"

"Wal, I'll be daddley-ding-darned!" snorted Old True. "I did think yeou hed some sense, Hal; but I guess I made a gosh-blamed mistake!"

"That is all right, father; but you ought to understand my feelings. Talking about sleep, why don't you go and get some for your own benefit? You need it as much as I do."

"No I don't nuther!" protested the old man. "I am old an' tuff an' kin go it well ernuff. Savvy?"

"It will not do any good to talk to me of sleep. How close this room is! I must get more air."

He strode out of the room, and Old True watched his retreating figure till it disappeared, then he again shook his head in a solemn manner.

"Tain't er belasted bit of good ter tork ter that boy!" he grunted. "It's sart'in sure he'll do jest as he darned pleases, fer all of any-boddy."

Meantime, Mike had found an opportunity to steal a few moments with his adored Norah. Catching her as she was coming from the room where Mrs. Horn was sleeping, he said:

"Whist, Norah, me gel, is it you?"

"Is it me?" she echoed, with apparent disgust. "An' hiv yez a dacent pair av oies in yer hid, Moike Maloney? Kin yez see anythin' at all, at all?"

"Noow be aisy, Norah, me darlint—"

"Keerful, Misther Maloney! An' who gave the loikes av you l'ave ter carl me thot, Oi'd loike ter know? Av yez don't be afther k'apin' a civil toongue in yer hid, Oi'll give yez a schlap acrost th' jaw, so Oi will!"

"Oh, go 'long wid yez, Norah! Ye don't m'ane more thin half thot yez soay."

"An' it's a loier ye'd be carlin' av me, is it! Be hivins! thot is more thin Oi kin schtand fram sich an odamahoon as you! Take thot, an' say how yez loike it!"

She gave poor Mike a slap that made him stagger for a moment. But the little Irishman quickly regained his balance and made a spring for her, exclaiming:

"An' is thot th' way yez tr'ate dacent p'aple? Begorra! Oi'll not fergit th' t'achin' av me mith'er. She always toold me to returd good fer avil—a kiss for a blow. So now you take thot, Miss Shpit-foire, an' see how yez loike it!"

He suddenly caught her in his arms and planted a resounding smack fairly on her red lips. Norah uttered a smothered scream, and pretended to struggle desperately.

"It's insultin' av me yez be!" she declared.

"See av Oi don't pay yez fer thot, noow!"

"An' don't yez loike it, Norah?" he asked.

"Niver a bit! Who gave yez l'ave to do the loikes av thot?"

"It's not axin' l'ave Oi wur; but if yez don't loike it, Oi will take it back. Hould aisy now whoile Oi am getthing av th' same."

"Niver a wance will Oi hold aisy! D'yez think ye kin ploay thot thrick on me again? Go on wid yez, Moike Maloney!"

"Arrah, but Oi am bount to hiv thot kiss back, Norah, me gel. Ye said ye did not loike it, an' Oi don't want yez ter kape anything av moine thot yez don't loike."

"Is thot th' way ye're tarkin'? An' yez niver axed me at all, at all did I want it! Oi'm ashamed av yez, Misther Moloney, actin' loike this wid th' misthress loayin' in such a terrible condition oonder this very roof! It's a disgrace, so it is! An' noow yez w'u'd be afther kissin' av me ag'in! D'yez think I will allow thot?"

"Well, nivver did Oi see th' loikes av you! Yez don't loike th' kiss thot Oi gave yez, but joost the soame, ye will not let me take it back. Is thot consistent noow, Oi'd loike ter know? By me troth! Oi will hiv thot back!"

"An' av yez do, Oi hope Oi'll nivver draw another brith in all me loife! Av Oi don't want it, Oi'm goin' ter kape it, noow Oi hiv it."

But Mike was persistent.

"Oh, coome noow, Norah gel! it's downright robbery yez be doin' ter kape it."

"G'long wid yez blarney!"

"But Oi am in earnest, so Oi am. I want it back."

"What d'yez take me fer?"

"Oi'd loike ter take yez fer betther ur wu'st."

"Oi'd hiv ye oonderstand Oi um a dacent gel, Misther Maloney. It's not fit to go wid dacent p'aple yez be, at all, at all. An' to think yez hiv th' chake ter want ter kiss me ag'in! Av yez don't go way wid yez, Oi'll brake me arm acrost yez nose! D'yez hear thot, noow?"

"Whist, Norah! Be aisy! Oi hear some wan coomin'! Noow Oi will hiv thot kiss, so hilp me!"

"Is it some wan coomin'? Sure yez be roight! An' av yez will hiv it, take it quick before they see us, Moike!"

In another moment the sturdy little Irishman received the coveted kiss back again—with interest.

"Och, Norah, me darlint!" he whispered, as he gave her a strong squeeze with one hand and wiped his lips with the back of the other; "yer ther dearest gel in all ther worruld! Av Oi only hid th' toime, Oi'd be afther tellin' av yez how much Oi think av yez, but—"

"You be gittin', Moike!" she whispered, giving him a push. "Av we wur caught—Merciul hivvins!"

A moment later the little Irishman found himself alone, but he was happy over his success.

"Begorra!" he softly cried; "theer wur'n't nivver a saoul coomin' at all, at all, an' Oi knowed it all th' toime. It's a schlik bit av a thrick Oi played on th' gel! Whin they git ahead av Moike Maloney they hiv ter roise before loight ur stay up all night." And then he actually hugged himself with delight, while he capered like a boy.

The most of the cowboys managed to secure some sleep before the time came for starting on the trail, and by daylight the neighboring ranches had sent some men to the assistance of the Red Spur cattlemen.

With the break of day, the party started on the trail, Old True at the head. With surprising swiftness, they followed on the trail till the point was reached where the outlaws had attempted to baffle pursuit. There they were forced to move more slowly, but Old True was not to be deceived by the tricks of the kidnappers.

It was past midday when a horseman suddenly rounded a spur of rocks and confronted them. A cry of recognition came from many lips.

It was Frank Cranston, the deserter.

For a moment the ex-lieutenant halted, then he rode fearlessly forward.

A dark look settled on Hurricane Hal's face. Old True Blue also regarded the deserter suspiciously, muttering:

"Haow in thunder comes he hyer? That whole game at ther ranch wur a trick, an' I kinder wonder ef he wur'n't in it. Mebbe he has turned outlaw. By gosh! I sh'u'dn't be a darned bit s'prised!"

Cranston drew rein a short distance away.

"Se you are on the trail, are you?" came from his bearded lips. "Well, it is high time you were!"

"Whut do yeou mean by that?" demanded the Trusty.

"Just what I say. You have allowed your-

selves to be fooled and tricked long enough. The Marauders, with this second Captain Red Hand as leader, have flung you their defiance and showed their utter disregard for you. They put you on a false scent and then kidnapped the girls, but—"

"Neow, looker heur," broke in Old True; "yeou seem ter know er t'arnal sight about this business, I'll be darned ef yeou don't! It looks kinder s'picious frum whar I be."

A hot flush suffused Cranston's face, and he instantly rode forward till he confronted the Trusty at a short distance. Looking the old man fairly in the eyes, he spoke in a low, suppressed tone:

"Just what do you mean to insinuate by those words? Answer like a man!"

The veteran threw back his head with a derisive grin.

"Tetched ye, by gosh!" he chuckled. "Pricked ye whar ther skin wur thin!"

Cranston's hand fell on the butt of a holstered revolver, and his face was dark as a storm-cloud. But if he had a thought of using the weapon on the old man, he was prevented from carrying out his intention by the prompt action of Hurricane Hal.

"H'ld hard, there!" cried the foreman of the Red Spur Ranch, wheeling his horse between the two men and confronting the deserter-lieutenant. "This is no time for quarreling, father; especially with a man of *this* sort."

At these words, the blood vanished from Frank Cranston's face, leaving him pale and trembling with fury. For some moments he was speechless, so great was his passion.

The eyes of the hot-blooded foreman met those of the angered man, and a derisive light burned in their dark depths.

Cranston's lips moved, and he muttered, hoarsely:

"You shall pay dearly for those words."

Hal flung out one hand.

"Don't waste your breath in threats," he advised. "Why are you here?"

"Bah! What right have you to question me? Why should I not be here?"

"Answer or not, as you choose, you are here for no good purpose."

"Good purpose!" echoed the deserter, scornfully. "And are you here for a good purpose? You are able to deceive all around you, but I know you for what you are. I can read your heart!"

Hal seemed staggered by these words.

"What do you mean?" he slowly demanded.

"What do I mean? As if you do not know! You cannot deceive me, even though you are able to pull wool over the eyes of the man whom you call father. I read you and understand you for what you are."

"And I understand you for what you are—a deserter and a coward."

The hands of both were on their revolvers, and it seemed as if blood would be shed in another moment; but, of a sudden, Frank Cranston's hand fell from the weapon, and he turned to Old Zeb Horn, speaking swiftly:

"You are searching for your daughters, old man, so let me tell you they are safe."

"Safe?" repeated the rancher. "How do ye know thot? You hain't foolin'?"

"No. I speak the truth. Last night I had the pleasure of rescuing them from the outlaws, and—"

"Whar be they now?"

"Hold on a little, and I will come to that. As I said, I rescued them, but we were hotly pursued by the Marauders. Our flight continued till morning, and then we ran full upon a detachment of soldiers. I was recognized and forced to fly for life. Even then, I would have been shot down but for the bravery of Miss Kate. She placed herself in front of the carbines, that were turned upon me, and that gave me an opportunity to get away. I have been pursued, but managed to give those who were following me the slip."

"An' my Leetle Kit—whar is she now?" excitedly cried Old Zeb.

As clearly as possible, Cranston told where they had come upon the soldiers, assuring the old rancher he need have no further fear for the safety of the girls, as, in all probability, they were being escorted toward the ranch at that moment. Zeb was eager to go on, but the deserter spoke of the possibility of failing to meet the Boys in Blue, advising them to strike for a certain pass, through which the troopers would be almost sure to come.

Hal, Mat and Old True Blue were among the most eager listeners to the deserter's story, but it was plain by the look on the foreman's face he did not fully credit it. Old True Blue also shook his head in a doubtful manner.

"Nother gosh-darned trick, I'll bet a squash!" was his mental observation.

"If this is true," spoke Hal, "this man should not object to keeping us company till the soldiers are met."

Cranston reined his horse to face the foreman.

"That is fine logic!" fell scornfully from his lips. "If it is true, then I should certainly object to keeping you company."

"Why?"

"Because those soldiers are looking for me. I

would be a fool to thrust myself into danger in such a manner, as you must plainly see."

For a moment the cowboy was silent, then he said:

"You should either face your peril like a man or get out of this part of the country. Why do you remain here?"

Cranston tossed back his head.

"My motive is nothing to you."

"You are mistaken; your motive is something to me."

Their eyes met again, and each read deadly hatred in the look of the other. Suddenly, the deserter said:

"I refuse to explain before all these listeners, but I wish to speak with you alone. Come, we will pass beyond yonder rocks. I have something I wish to tell you privately."

For an instant Hal hesitated, but a scornful laugh broke from Cranston's lips.

"Do you fear to face me alone?" he asked, derisively. "Then we shall only be man to man. I did not fear to face you with all your friends at your back."

Hal made a motion.

"Go on; I will follow."

Old True touched his horse with the spur, and the animal leaped forward till it was checked directly in the path of the daring deserter.

"Look ye heur," came sternly from the veteran's lips; "yeou know me, I reckon? Ef yeou hurt my boy, I'll hunt yeou ter ther ends of ther 'arth, so help me Hannah! I'll run ye daown an' have yer life ef—"

"Father!"

That word from the young foreman's lips suddenly checked the old man's speech.

"This is no time for such talk," declared Hal. "In the past I have proved myself fully able to take care of myself when given an even show. This is but one man, and I should not hesitate now."

"Thar hain't but one heur," admitted Old True; "but we dunno haow menmy thar be behind them rocks. Perhaps twenty of his pards are thar, an'—"

"I have no pards," asserted Cranston. "I am an outcast, with the hand of every man turned against me. Being an Ishmael in one sense, why should I not be in another and turn my hand against all men?"

There was a deep bitterness in his voice—a bitterness that suddenly and unexpectedly touched Hurricane Hal's heart with compassion. Perhaps this man was more sinned against than sinning. That was the thought which flashed through the young cowboy's mind. What if Frank Cranston had loved Little Kit? Was that a crime? Should that make them deadly enemies? Both loved the same girl; either would lay down his life for her. Being rivals, must they be foes?

Touching his horse with the spur, Hal galloped toward the point of rocks. Old True Blue fell back, respectful to his boy's wish, and Cranston followed the man he hated with all the bitterness of his passionate heart.

Beyond the rock, Hal drew rein and faced about to wait for the other. The deserter was there in a moment, and the two once more looked into each other's eyes. For a little time neither spoke.

"Cranston," said Hal, breaking the silence at length, "I fancy we have not understood each other in the past."

"You are right," gritted the deserter-lieutenant; "we have not understood each other."

"We have been enemies—"

"We are still enemies."

"I believe you have been misjudged."

A sneer passed over the deserter's face.

"I know not what game you are attempting now," he said, "but I am not to be deceived by you. I am an outcast—a man with a price on my head—but I am a man, just the same. You are favored, honored, respected; but at heart you are a villain!"

The accusation was fiercely flung into the teeth of the handsome cowboy, and Hurricane Hal's face suddenly grew pale, his eyes again filling with a light of anger. For a moment he was too astonished to speak, but he soon regained his composure enough to say, in a cold, hard tone:

"Is this the way you meet my advances of friendship? Very well! I see sympathy is wasted on such as you, and once more I begin to fancy my suspicions may have been correct. You are a deserter. Why are you in this vicinity, risking your life, unless you have friends to whom you can turn? I have half-believed you an outlaw, but tried to think better of you. Now, I am more than ever convinced I made no mistake. I believe you are in league with this Captain Red Hand, who has apparently risen from the dead!"

Cranston laughed, but there was no merriment in the sound.

"You play it boldly," he nodded, keeping his eyes fixed on Hal and his hand close to the butt of a ready revolver. "You are a shrewd rascal, but you can not wool me. Now, I know you for what you are. You have tried to deceive a pure and trusting girl—you have deceived her! She believed in you; believed you noble and manly! You dared not whisper your evil desires in her

ears, for you knew she would read your heart and turn from you with loathing and horror; so you laid an infamous plot to possess her—to make her believe she was your wife, while, in truth, she became your mistress. Ha, you start! You flush with shame! Your face betrays—”

“Nothing but the anger and disgust I can not help feeling. You can not believe the words you speak!”

“But I *do* believe them! I believe you are in league with the outlaws, and you arranged that Red Hand, disguised as a parson, should perform a mock marriage ceremony. What your further plans were I do not know, but I baffled your original plot, and saved an innocent girl. You led the pursuit, and your outlaw pards struck another blow. The second was more successful than the first, but I have been the means of again thwarting you, and—”

“Stop!” thundered Hal, his eyes blazing. “I have heard enough! You do not believe the words your lips utter! Is it a quarrel you are determined on?”

“A quarrel—yes! For Kate’s sake I will kill you! Draw and defend yourself!”

A revolver appeared in Frank Cranston’s hand.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DUEL.

THE deserter-lieutenant’s eyes blazed with the fury that was within his soul; bitterest hatred showed in the look he cast upon the handsome cowboy. So fierce was his passion that he trembled from head to feet as if shaken with a chill.

And Hal? He was also aroused to anger, his black eyes flashing with a red light that seemed like a lurid gleam of lightning bursting from the heart of a storm-cloud. The hot blood in his veins was leaping madly, his mouth dry, his throat filled with a huge bunch that threatened to stop his breathing.

With an effort he threw off the spell that was overcoming him, forcing a harsh laugh from his lips.

“So you have turned assassin, Frank Cranston! What more could be expected from a traitor? You hold the drop; go on with your treacherous work!”

The deserter shook his head.

“Is that what you think of me, Ballou?” he demanded, with something like reproach in his voice. “I may be a deserter, but I am no coward. As you say, I have the drop—I can wipe you out with a single shot—”

“Why do you parley? Finish your foul work, if that is what you mean to do!”

“Then would I be a coward, indeed! I mean to have your life, but I am no assassin. You shall have an equal chance; we will fight a duel.”

A scornful smile passed over Hurricane Hal’s face.

“And will we fight a duel?” fell from his lips. “What if I decline?”

“You will not!”

“Why?”

“You do not dare!”

“Do not dare?”

The cowboy laughed again, derision in his manner.

“No, you do not *dare*!” cried the deserter, bending forward in his saddle, the weapon in his hand partly raised.

“Is that so bold a thing?”

“If you refuse, then will I shoot you like the dastardly dog you are!”

“It would be murder.”

“In the sight of man—yes; but it would only be my duty. In some way I must save Kate Horn from you. You have her in your power, for she loves and trusts you; but as there is a God above, you shall not blast and destroy her fair young life!”

“Man, you are mad!”

“Have it so, if you will. I care not what you call me. I know my duty, and I mean to do it. One or both shall die before either leaves this spot. Draw, draw!”

Still the cowboy hesitated.

“I have no desire to kill you,” he said.

“Fool! It is your only chance for life—your only hope to carry on your scheme! If you refuse, I shall know you are the coward you would have branded me a few moments ago—I shall know it is fear I see in your eyes! And would the peerless Kate love a man who had proved a coward? If you love your life, you will defend it!”

“Look here, Cranston, what do you hope to win by this? Do you fancy Kate Horn will ever become anything to you, even if you kill me here? If you do, then you *must* be deranged. If I fall, she will know by whose hand I was slain, and in her heart she will loathe and despise you! Never will she bear you in her sight! Never—”

“Enough! It is not for my sake I will kill you, but for hers. I know you for what you are, and I would save her. I hope to win nothing! I would force this duel to the end, even if I knew it meant death for us both—as it may. Draw, I say! I can wait no longer!”

Hal’s hand fell on the butt of a revolver.

“If you will have it—” he began; only to be interrupted by Cranston’s cold, hard tones:

“Swing off, Ballou, if you want a chance for life. At this distance it would mean death for us both.”

The cowboy saw that he spoke the truth, but he remained motionless, his eyes fixed on the deserter, closely watching every movement. Observing this, Cranston reined his horse away, halting at a certain distance.

“Are you ready?” he called.

Hal had drawn a revolver and sat with his weapon in his hand, but he scarcely knew he had done so. He was thinking of the man before him.

“It is plain Frank Cranston is deranged,” was the thought which passed through the foreman’s head. “His hatred for me has led him to this. I must not have his blood on my hands, but how am I to avoid it? I can kill him at this distance, but I do not wish to do so. At the same time, I will be in danger of falling before his fire.”

His position was not on enviable one, but he fancied the deserter might miss, being in such a disturbed condition. That was his only chance.

It seemed as if Cranston had read Hal’s thoughts, even though at a considerable distance, for he cried:

“Oh, no; I am not going to miss you, Ballou! My nerves are steadier now. I will drive a bullet through your brain with the first shot! Ready?”

Hal bowed.

“Will you give the word?” asked Cranston.

The cowboy shook his head, and the deserter said:

“Then I will. At the word three we will fire. Now—one, two, three!”

There was not much time for thought. With the word, both men lifted their weapons and fired, but Hurricane Hal’s revolver pointed straight upward into the air.

For a moment it seemed that both bullets were wasted, then the cowboy lurched forward and fell heavily from the saddle, striking the ground with a thud.

Cranston had not missed!

Giving his horse the spur, the deserter was at the side of the fallen man in a moment, throwing the animal back on its haunches with a surge of his strong hand, while he peered eagerly down at the silent body on the ground, his revolver half lifted, as if for a shot that would finish the work.

Affrighted, Hal’s horse had wheeled and galloped back to disappear beyond the spur of rocks.

The cowboy did not stir; he lay like a dead man, and across one temple ran a tiny stream of blood.

And then, as he gazed down on the work of his hand, Frank Cranston was seized by such a feeling of horror as had never before possessed him. His heart refused to beat, his eyes started from his head, he gasped like one suffocating. Clapping one hand to his head, he groaned:

“Dead, dead, dead!”

The words seemed wrung in anguish from the depths of his soul.

“Yes, dead!” he repeated. “And I forced him to it! Even then, he fired into the air! He did not try to kill me!”

“Great God! I am a murderer!”

With that wild cry, he reined his horse about and drove the spurs into the animal’s flanks, dashing away like the wind.

None too soon!

Around the point of rocks came Old True Blue, with the rest of the party close behind. The Trusty saw the flying figure, and in a moment he seemed to understand what had occurred.

“Shoot that critter!” he cried, wildly. “Shoot him down!”

A dozen bullets whistled about Cranston’s head, but not one touched the flying man or his horse. The deserter soon disappeared, not harmed in the least.

Old True Blue saw the figure that lay stretched at full length on the ground. Leaping from his horse, he was soon on his knees, lifting Hal in his strong arms, while he sobbed:

“My boy! my boy! my boy! Oh, God! he is killed!”

The others halted near, but the old man cried: “On, on! Arter ther devil who hes murdered my boy! Kill ther wretch—shoot him daown! Don’t let him git erway! Oh, may ther cuss of Heaven fall on him!”

The cowboys wheeled onward in pursuit of the fleeing man, only Maverick Mat and Zeb Horn remaining with the grief-shaken father.

With the limp body of his boy clasped close in his arms, Old True Blue rocked to and fro, sobbing like a child, broken words and sentences falling from his lips, tears streaming down his furrowed cheeks.

“My boy—my noble boy!” he murmured, gazing wildly into Hal’s face. “And yeou wur all ther worl’ ter yer old father! Dead! dead! Oh, Jackie! Speak—speak ter yer old dad! Open yer eyes! It can’t be yeou are dead—no, no, no! Poor boy—poor Jack! Yeou are all I’ve got! Ef yeou are dead, ther old man won’t

have nuthin’ ter live for no longer! Can’t ye open yer eyes—boy?”

Maverick Mat’s hand fell on Old True’s shoulder.

“Put him down, Mr. Ballou,” spoke Hal’s pard. “He may not be dead.”

If he heard, the grief-shaken parent did not appear to understand, for he still rocked to and fro with the body of his boy clasped close to his heart. Mat shook the man till he looked up.

“Put him down, Truman,” repeated the cowboy, gently but firmly unclasping the Trusty’s fingers. “We must see if he is really dead. If he is not—”

“Yas, he’s dead, my boy!” and Old True dashed his sleeve across his eyes. “He wur all I had left in ther worl’. Neow I hain’t got nuthin’ ter live fer—nuthin’ a tall! My poor boy! That critter killed him!” with sudden fury. “I’ll hev his blood ef I hev ter chaice him ter ther hottest corner of ther Burnin’ Pit!”

Mat was examining Hal’s wound, and soon an exclamation of satisfaction came from his lips.

“Give me your flask, True!” he cried.

“What is it?” eagerly demanded the Trusty, quickly passing the required article.

“He is *not* dead!” asserted Mat.

“Thet’s so!” nodded Old Zeb, who had been closely watching Hal’s face. “I jest saw his eyes flutter! He’s comin’ round!”

This was almost too good for Old True to believe.

“Yeou hain’t foolin’ me?” he shouted, glaring wildly into Hal’s face. “Yeou are sure he hain’t dead? Oh, my boy!”

“The bullet has passed along the side of his skull and stunned him for a time,” said Mat; “but he is good as a hundred dead men. If I am not badly mistaken, he will be able to sit in the saddle before two hours have passed.”

A little of the liquor was passed between Hal’s parted lips, and in a few seconds the wounded cowboy showed decided signs of returning consciousness.

Old True Blue hung over his boy, refusing to turn his eyes from Hal’s face for a second.

At length the foreman’s eyes slowly opened, and a long deep sigh came from his lips. Then the liquor caused him to cough a bit, and Mat lifted him so he could get a breath of fresh air.

“He’s dyin’!” gasped Old True.

“I reckon not, father!” spoke Hal, with a faint smile. “I am a hard boy to kill.”

The Trusty sprang to his feet and danced with delight.

“Great gosh all hemlock?” he shouted, striking his hands together. “I’ll be darned ef he hain’t comin’ raound! Holy smoke! who’d ‘a’ thort it! An’ thar we wur, dead as hay! Oh, jizzlin’ Jupiter!”

Again Hal smiled, for the antics of the old man were ludicrous in the extreme.

“My head feels bad—aches fearfully,” he said, lifting his hand to it. “What happened? I don’t seem to remember.”

“You were shot.”

“Shot? By whom?”

“Frank Cranston, the deserter.”

“Ah, yes! I remember now.”

“But the whelp shall pay fer it!” cried Old True Blue. “I’ll fix him, darned ef I don’t!”

Hal turned his eyes on his father.

“You must not harm Frank Cranston,” he said.

The Trusty was astonished.

“Why, the gosh darned skunk shot ye, boy!” he cried.

“In a fair duel,” declared Hal.

“Did yeou two fight a duel?”

“We did.”

“Wa-al, by thutter!”

The foreman continued:

“Cranston fancied he had a grudge against me, and he wished to settle it in that manner. We faced each other on equal terms and with an equal chance. Both fired a single shot. I did not touch him, but he tumbled me from the saddle. For that, he is in no way to blame. I hold no feeling against him.”

“Waal, it’s good fer him he didn’t stay raound tell we got aour hands onter him,” asserted Old True. “We’d handed him higher’n a kite ‘thout axin’ wur it a duel ur not.”

“Then he has departed?”

“Yas; in er consarned hurry. Ther most of ther boys are arter him. They may bring back his skelp.”

“I trust he will escape.”

“Waal, yeou are darned funny abaout a critter as has jest shot ye. Don’t yeou hold no grudge?”

“No.”

“Great gosh!”

“If he tells the truth, he saved Kate and Sylva from the outlaws last night.”

“Darned ef I b’lieve he told ther truth.”

“Perhaps not; but I have hope.”

“I callate he is right in with ther darned aoutlaws him own self.”

“It may be.”

With a handkerchief, Mat bound up his pard’s wounded head, and in a short time, Hal was able to rise to his feet. Zeb had captured the foreman’s horse, and the animal was ready for

use. However, Hal was not able to sit in the saddle for a time.

Reclining in the shade of the rocks, the wounded cowboy, being urged to tell them of the duel, manufactured a plausible tale, but one far from betraying the real state of affairs. In no way did he bring Little Kate's name into the matter.

Closely watching his comrade's face, Mat saw he was skillfully avoiding the truth; but he did not betray his discovery, for he knew Hal must have a purpose in deceiving Old True and Zeb.

After taking one or two light drinks from the flask and reclining in the shade some time, Hal finally declared he was ready to get into the saddle. This he did without assistance, and the trio started to follow those who had pursued the deserter-lieutenant.

They did not go far before they met the cowboys returning.

"Begorra! th' divvil got cl'ane away!" cried Mike Maloney. "It's Sathan himsilf as must hilt thit crayther."

Hal drew a breath of relief when he thus learned the fugitive had escaped.

The appearance of the young foreman caused the party to break into a wild cheer.

"Hurro!" bellowed Mike, rising in the stirrups and waving his hat around his head. "Th' yooing masher is not did at all, at all! Hurro! hurro."

Hal was greeted in a manner that brought the color to his face once more.

"I will not forget this, boys," he said, earnestly. "You are good men and true."

With a revolver in each hand, Wobbly Walt poured a fusillade of shots in the air.

"This is a great day!" he shouted. "Ef we'd only cotched that deserter, thet'd made ther fun complete!"

"We'd hanged him ter ther fu'st tree we kem ter!" nodded another of the cattlemen.

"And in that manner incurred my greatest displeasure," asserted Hal. "Cranston was not to blame for what occurred. We fought a duel—a fair and square duel. It was my fortune to fall. I hold no hard feelings against Cranston. In the past the man proved himself a brave fellow, and, though he be a deserter, we should not turn against him. If he told the truth, last night he succeeded in saving Kate and Sylva from the outlaws—"

"W'at ef he told a lie?" cried Wobbly Walt.

"Then he has it to answer for. It ought not to be long before we discover whether he told a lie or the truth."

A short time later, the party was moving forward on the trail once more. Hal believed it best to take Cranston's advice and move toward Gipson's Pass, where they would be most liable to meet the Blue Coats, if the deserter had told the truth.

However, the pass was not reached before a small squad of soldiers appeared, and in their midst the cowboys distinguished two female figures.

"Thar they be!" yelled Zeb Horn, driving the spurs into his horse. "Ther are my gals!"

Cheering like madmen, the entire party galloped down upon the troopers and the fair ones they were escorting.

CHAPTER XII.

"THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE," ETC.

It were useless attempting to picture the joy of that meeting. Zeb Horn nearly fainted from delight when he held the girls in his arms once more, and the cowboys seemed scarcely less excited. Rough fellows that they were, they slapped each other on the back, shook hands, danced and literally embraced in many cases, while they cheered till they were hoarse.

"Great gosh all hemlock!" gasped Old True Blue, fairly out of breath. "This is ther greatest day I ever saw, an' I won't except nary darned one!"

Then, when the girls were released from Zeb's arms, Old True tried to shake hands with them, but was literally overcome when both kissed him.

"Wh-wh-what!" he stammered. "That fer me—sech a jizzlin' ole critter as I be! Smotherin' Moses! yeou can't mean it, gals! Yeou made a mistake, I kneow yeou did! It's them boys thar yeou tuck me ter be," and he pointed at Hal and Mat.

The girls ran to their lovers, their hands outstretched, and they were gathered to two broad, manly bosoms, in which beat noble hearts and true.

"Musha, musha!" moaned Mike Maloney, in an aside. "Oi am lift out intoirely! Av Oi ounly bid me Norah here noow, Oi'd be wid 'em, so Oi w'u'd."

The soldiers explained they had been detached to escort the maidens to their home, while their comrades searched for the deserter-lieutenant. They were profusely thanked by those they had befriended, then they turned back to rejoin their mates.

Finding a spring in the shade of some black rocks, the little party halted for a time, allowing themselves and their horses a chance to

rest, while man and beast were thus given time to partake of food which they sorely stood in need of.

The sun beat down with a merciless heat that would have been suffocating but for the cool breezes which occasionally came from the mountains to the north. As it was, all were glad to keep well within the shade.

When the girls had told their story and the cowboys had commented on the daring actions of the deserter-lieutenant who had endangered his life for them, they found an opportunity to wander away with their lovers, passing beyond ear-shot of the others. Finding a secluded spot close at hand, the four sat down and talked for a time, but it was noticeable that Hal was strangely silent and moody. The girls had not been told of the critical condition of Mrs. Horn, for it was thought best to keep that from them for a time.

After a while, Mat and Sylva strolled away together, leaving Kate and Hal there. Then, finding herself alone with him, Kate asked Hal for the dozenth time how he came to be wearing a bandage about his head. He turned till his eyes met hers, replying:

"If you wish to know so very much, I will tell you my reason for wearing a bandage about my head. I have heard you praise Frank Cranston for his bravery, and your words have sealed my lips, but now—"

She caught his hand.

"Did he— It cannot be! No, no!"

He smiled a bit, but it was a sad smile.

"But for him I would not be wearing a bandage there," he declared. "This day Cranston and I have been face to face—this day a bullet from his revolver stretched me senseless on the ground. Had the shot passed a trifle lower, it would have ended my life."

She looked at him wildly, strangely.

"I would not have believed that of him!" she finally cried, a look of pain on her face. "I know he hates you, but I thought him a man."

"Oh, our chances were equal," assured Hal. "I also held a revolver, and I fired one shot."

A gasping sound came from her lips.

"You fired—at him? And you are a dead-shot! Great Heaven! he is dead!"

She pressed her hands to her heart, her fair face marked with horror. A heavy weight seemed to fall on his soul as he gazed into her dilated eyes.

"And would you care so much if I had killed him?"

"Oh, yes, yes! It would drive me mad!"

His face grew stern.

"At last you have betrayed yourself," he said, in a suppressed tone.

She looked at him wonderingly.

"Betrayed myself?"

"That is what I said."

"What do you mean?"

He arose to his feet and stood before her, his face dark with the jealousy aroused within his soul. She also arose, and for a moment she shrunk before that accusing look, then she met his gaze fairly, wonderingly.

"I think I understand you at last," he declared, keeping himself in check. "I have suspected the truth for some time, and now it has come out. In trying to deceive yourself, you have deceived me in a measure."

"Deceived myself!—deceived you! I do not understand."

"Then I will make my meaning plain. You love Frank Cranston! Stop! Do not speak! Hear me out. You think yourself bound to me, and so you are ready to marry me. But for that, Cranston would be the favored one. Even though he is a fugitive from the men who were once his comrades, he still has a place in your heart. If he were not dishonored, if he still held his former position, then you—"

"Stop!"

That word checked him. Her golden head was thrown back, her blue eyes were flashing.

"You have said enough!" she cried. "I understand you now! And do you think me such a two-faced creature? Very well! I am glad we came to understand each other before it was too late."

She turned away, but he sprung and caught her by the arm.

"Wait!" he panted. "Stop a moment—"

Quick as a flash she threw off his hand, giving him one indignant, crushing look.

"I care to hear no more!" she proudly declared. "You are unkind—unjust."

"And you mean to leave me thus?"

"It was not I who brought it about."

"Was it not? Had I not read your secret in your eyes, you might have gone on deceiving yourself and me. That discovery brought it about. You do not deny you love him."

"Deny it?"

"You dare not!"

"And I would not if I dared. You have accused me of treachery, but you cannot prove your charge."

"Tell me I am wrong, and—"

"I will tell you nothing of the kind."

He fell back, his hands clinched, his form quivering.

"Then it is true!" came sternly from his

lips. "I knew as much! It is not loving Frank Cranston that I blame you for, but it is deceiving me. But now I know the truth. Between us there is a great chasm—"

"Built by your hands!" she cried, something like a sob in her voice.

She felt he had suspected her without cause, and her heart was hot with indignation. For the time Frank Cranston's fate was forgotten. She did not ask if he had been killed in the encounter, for Hal's sudden display of jealousy had driven the question from her mind. Outwardly she was stern and indignant, but inwardly she was crying:

"Oh, Hal, Hal! that you should think this of me! And I love you so—I love you so! How cruel and unjust you are! It will kill me—kill me. But he shall not see—he shall not understand how much pain he has caused me. I will hide my feelings! He shall never know—never, never."

As for Hal, he was amazed at her display of spirit. Her mood was quite new to him. Always before she had seemed the clinging, timid child of nature, her soul in her eyes, her heart's thoughts bubbling freely from her lips. She had been so frank, so childlike! And now, of a sudden, a wonderful change had come over her. He could not understand what it meant.

"It must be true," he was mentally crying—"she loves him! she loves him! But for that, she would never seem like this. It is not natural with her; she has always been so frank—so free! I cannot understand the change. I have always looked on her as a girl—a mere child; but now, all at once, she has become a woman. I still love her with all my heart—God! how I love her! But I have lost her—lost her."

His deep anguish showed on his face, but she saw it not. Her eyes were turned away and her tiny foot tapping the ground, while her gaze seemed riveted on the sun-scorched peaks which arose above the barren rocks. It almost seemed as if she had quite forgotten him.

Seized by a sudden temptation, a great emptiness seeming to fill her heart, he took a step as if to clasp her in his arms.

Had she remained, he would have done so, and the misunderstanding might have been set aright without further delay; but, at the very moment he took that step, she moved away. She did it all unconscious of his intention, and the act widened the breach.

Fiercely crushing down his desire, he folded his arms and stood looking after her. A few steps further on she paused and looked back, but there was no invitation in her eyes, for, with all her strength, she was holding herself in check. Something like an inkling of the truth came over him—his heart gave a great leap—he would have spoken—his tongue seemed frozen in his mouth.

And thus they stood, seeking to read each other's thoughts by the expression of their faces. In another moment all would have been set aright, but just then a merry voice called to them.

Sylva and Mat appeared.

For a moment Hal hesitated, then three steps carried him to Kate's side.

"It will be better if they do not suspect," he said, in a low tone. "If they know the truth, it will make things more unpleasant."

She simply bowed.

Mat and Sylva came up, chatting and laughing, happiness written on their faces. They little knew how their apparent pleasure struck a chill to the hearts of their friends.

With a great effort, both Hal and Kate acted their parts so well that the others did not suspect. A short time later the four turned toward the spot where the rest of the party reclined in the shadow of the rocks.

As they walked along, Kate found a chance to ask a question, heard only by Hal:

"Did you kill him?"

He understood who she meant. She was still thinking of Frank Cranston.

A fierce thrill of hatred ran through his heart, and at that moment he would have given the world could he truthfully answer "yes."

There was a moment of silence, then he replied:

"I would to God I had!"

She gave him a look that cut like a knife.

"I thought you more generous," she said.

How bitter were her words when he remembered how he had fired straight up into the air, thus sparing Frank Cranston's life, only to fall before the deserter-lieutenant's bullet. Generous! Had she seen him then, what could she have thought! Her words rankled in his heart like the barb of a poisoned arrow.

"You see you were wrong," he said, harshly.

"However, he still lives."

"You failed to kill him?"

A grating laugh, low and suppressed, came from his lips.

"Yes, I failed."

"I am glad his blood is not on your hands!"

"You may be glad now. It is all right that you should. Be glad while you may!"

"What—what! You cannot mean—"

"To kill him—yes!"

She caught at his wrist, but he drew away.

"Do not touch me!" he whispered, just as a ripple of merry laughter came from Sylva's

lips, and Mat joined in the mirth. "I cannot bear your touch!"

She shrunk away as if he had struck her, lifting one trembling hand to her lips. He did not look at her terrified eyes, but, speaking so she alone could hear, he said:

"You have accused me of being unjust and ungenerous, but you do not know the truth. Frank Cranston would have killed me if he could—he fancied he had. Now my turn shall come! The day is not far distant when it shall once more be his life or mine. Then I will shoot—and shoot to kill!"

She staggered blindly for a moment, pressing a hand over her throbbing heart, then she panted:

"It will be murder—murder!"

"Is that the way you look at it?"

"Yes, yes! Oh, Hal! you cannot mean what you say! Think—think what he has done for us! Think from what disgrace he saved us at the risk of his own life! And after that—after he ventured so much to save me from those terrible outlaws—"

"How much did he venture?" and a sudden thought flashed through the cowboy's mind. "Why is Frank Cranston still lingering in this part of the country, when he is in constant danger of being captured, and suffering the fate of a traitor? Can you answer those questions?"

No sound came from her parted lips.

"You do not suspect the truth? Then I will tell you what I think. I believe Cranston is an outlaw himself!"

"No, no!"

"That is what I believe, and I am not alone in thinking so."

"It cannot be!"

"And why not?"

"Think—think how much he ventured! think how he baffled the original plan of the Red Hand!"

"Ah, did he? I fancy not! It is plain to me the Red Hand's plan was carried out to the letter. Listen; we have but a moment more. Captain Red Hand was supposed to be dead, and he wished to make it known that he still lived. To do so, he adopted a daring plan. Disguised as a parson, he came to the Red Spur, but his men lay close at hand, ready for work when the proper time came. Cranston was sent to expose him, and then the outlaws appeared, enabling Red Hand to make good his escape. He knew we would pursue him, and his other tools, Spotted Dan and Spike Joe, had been carefully instructed how to act. While we were on a false scent, supposing you were a captive in Red Hand's power, they got in their work. If those things had not been carefully planned from the first, they could not have been carried out so successfully. Red Hand knew he would be exposed; in the excitement, Cranston was to lead you where Spotted Dan and Spike Joe could capture you without raising an alarm. All this was done, and the plan of the outlaw chief worked like a charm."

They were within sight of the lolling cowboys, and she paused to say:

"You do not believe that! If it were true, he would not have rescued me."

"Rescued you! That, like his other acts, was a sham. He did it for effect. That man loves you—I confess that. He means to win you by fair means or foul, and he is making every effort to secure a place in your regard. For that reason, he performed this sham rescue. It does not stand to reason that he could have trailed those outlaws to their hole without being discovered; it does not stand to reason that he could have crept into that cavern, with which he was unacquainted, and succeeded in effecting your rescue without arousing the outlaws. It was all carefully planned. His story of the peril he encountered in securing the horses was a crafty tale to make him appear still more a hero in your eyes."

"But we were pursued—"

"And would have been recaptured had you not, very fortunately, come upon the soldiers. That was all that saved you from again falling into the hands of the outlaws."

"She seemed dazed by his words. Could they be true? Could it be possible Frank Cranston was such a double-dyed villain?"

"No, no, no!" she cried; "I will not believe it of him!"

Hal bowed, coldly.

"I did not think you would," he said, calmly. "But the time may come when you will have to believe. You have chosen between us; time shall tell who is the more worthy."

Then, without another word, they walked on together and joined the others.

CHAPTER XIII.

ANOTHER BLOW.

AMONG the men, Zeb Horn was the most eager to return to the ranch. He remembered in what a condition he had left his wife, and he longed to reach her side. Would he find her in her right mind? That was the question which troubled him most. If she were still deranged, the restoration of her child might bring back her reason.

But for Old True Blue's cautioning words, Zeb

would have driven his horse at a killing pace from the very start.

"Kinder keep yer plumb, old pard," advised the Trusty. "We'll git thar as soon as hoss-flesh kin kerri us an' endoor ther strain. Yeou fretted yerself nighly inter a fit while we wur restin', but ther critters wur in need of it. Yeou kin see they are a darned heap fresher fer ther leetle halt. Keep yer level, Zeb, keep yer level."

As it was, the old rancher held his place at the head of the party, Old True at his side.

When the hill country was left and the open plain reached, the sun poured down mercilessly upon them, even though it was slipping down the western sky. They were forced to travel at a slower pace, and perspiration dripped from human beings and the animals they rode. The water-flasks were called into frequent use.

Mat saw Hal was strangely silent and moody, and attempted to rally him, but the effort was a failure. The cloud still hung on the foreman's face, and not even the ghost of a smile played upon his features.

Mat was too quick-witted not to suspect the truth, but he knew his pard's disposition too well to speak of so delicate a matter. He saw Hal and Kate kept apart and exchanged no words, a thing which others might have discovered had not their thoughts been of other matters.

Sylva was happy as a bird, and for a time she did not dream Kate could be otherwise, but she finally fell to wondering at her friend's continued silence.

"You do not act naturally," declared the dark-eyed maid. "Why don't you laugh, Kit? I have not seen you smile for hours! What is the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

But Sylva was not to be deceived.

"Don't tell me that! I can see there is something the trouble. Tell me the truth, sister mine."

Kate shook her head.

"Wait," she said.

Sylva's eyes were opened, and she saw how strangely Hal appeared. Then she was sure something unpleasant had occurred, but, respecting Kate's wish, she did not urge her friend to explain.

"It can be nothing serious," she thought; but she felt an oppressive cloud settle over her.

Lower and lower sunk the sun till it seemed to touch the Gila Peaks which rose beyond the Arizona line. Night was at hand and the ranch still many miles away.

The party was forced to halt and give their animals a rest. With the gathering twilight, they rode on again.

Suddenly Old True Blue drew rein, a cry breaking from his lips.

Something had struck the ground almost at the fore feet of his horse.

"W'at is it?" asked Zeb, also coming to a halt.

"Gosh darned ef I kneow!" was the Trusty's answer, as he swung himself down from the saddle. "Suthin' kem whirrin' threw ther air and struck ther graound heur. I kin see it standin' up slantwise."

In a moment he had the "suthin'" in his hand, and another cry escaped his lips.

"W'at is it?" repeated Zeb.

"An arrer," was True's answer.

"An arrer?"

"Yas."

"Wal, thet's sing'ler! Who c'u'd 'a' fired it?"

"I didn't see nobody."

None of the party had seen the person who fired the arrow, which was singular, to say the least, as they were on the open plain.

"Gosh all hemlock!"

"W'at's ther matter now?" demanded Zeb.

"Thar's er bit of paper wrapped around ther shaft," answered the Trusty. "I cal'late it's er message of some kind—I do, by 'tarnal!"

He quickly removed the paper, and a single look showed there was writing on it.

"Jest as I said!" he cried, turning to Mat.

"Heur, yeou read it."

The cowboy took the slip of paper, and the others crowded around. There was still light enough to enable him to decipher the scrawling writing on the paper, and he slowly read aloud:

"Poor fools! Would you match yourselves against one risen from the dead? You are my enemies and I hate you all! Let Truman Ballou beware, for I will wring his heart and crush him beneath my feet. As for Zeb Horn, I have struck him another blow. He has his children, but I have his wife. It will take his last dollar to ransom her. Yours lovingly,
CAPTAIN RED HAND."

For a moment after Mat had finished reading there was a breathless silence, as if every one had been stricken dumb by what they heard.

"Gosh all hemlock!"

Old True Blue's exclamation broke the spell, and cries of rage came from the lips of nearly every man. Zeb Horn was the only one who remained perfectly silent, and the old rancher seemed dazed by a great shock.

Hurricane Hal was the first to give an order.

"The person who fired that arrow must be close at hand! Scatter and search for him! Do not let him escape!"

In a moment the entire party did so, riding here and there, bending forward in the saddle

and eagerly peering into the long grass which grew abundantly in that vicinity. The cowboys rode with their revolvers drawn, and had they found any one concealed in the grass, they would have made short work of him.

But the search was fruitless. To the chagrin of the herders, not a trace of any one besides their own party could be discovered.

While the men were looking for the person who fired the arrow, Old True Blue tried to arouse Zeb Horn from the dazed condition into which he had fallen.

"Come, come, pard!" urged the Trusty, shaking Zeb's arm. "Raout up heur! Yeou seem all flubbergasted."

Kate had sprung down from the saddle, and she clasped her arms about her father's neck, crying:

"Daddy, daddy! don't look like that! Speak, daddy! do say something!"

He did not seem to understand, for he looked at her in a wondering manner.

"It's yeour gal, Zeb," said Old True—"yeour own leetle gal. Why don't ye speak like she wants ye ter, pard?"

Zeb's lips moved, but only a husky, inarticulate whisper came from them. He seemed trying to say something, but the effort was a failure.

On every hand the cowboys could be seen riding here and there in the dusk, searching for the one who fired the arrow that bore the cruel message.

"Speak, daddy!" cried Kate, once more, her blue eyes looking wildly, appealingly into the depths of his dazed orbs. "You seem so strange! You frighten me, father! That dreadful message! Oh, mommy—my poor mommy!"

That aroused him. He started and glared wildly about, a savage exclamation breaking from his lips.

"It's Betsey!" he shouted—"my Betsey! Thet devil hes tooken her!"

He seemed to forget his child, for whom his heart had been torn with grief not many hours before. A new sorrow had overtaken him—a new affliction had fallen upon him.

Rudely, almost fiercely, he flung Kate's clinging arms from about his neck. Lifting his clinched fist above his head, he fairly screamed:

"Ef he hurts her—my pore wife—he shell suffer ther torture o' hell! Heaven's cuss be on him!"

Old True Blue attempted to clutch Zeb's arm once more, but the maddened rancher sprung toward his horse and flung himself into the saddle.

"Come on!" he yelled—"come on fer ther ranch! Foller me, ev'ry critter o' ye!"

Then he drove the spurs deep into the sides of his horse, and, yelling like a madman, went dashing away into the gathering gloom.

"Gosh a'mighty!" gasped Old True Blue. "Zeb's crazy as er bed-bug! He's gone clean daft! Arter him! Ef he hain't overtaken darned soon, he'll kill that thar hoss!"

Noticing Maverick Mat close at hand, the Trusty called to him:

"Heur, yeou! look arter these gals! I'm goin' ter foller Zeb Horn!"

As the cowboy wheeled toward him, he swung into the saddle and was off like the wind.

Among the cattlemen there was little delay in following the two men, but both had disappeared in the darkness that was gathering.

"They will make straight toward the Red Spur," said Mat. "We must follow as swiftly as possible. Zeb will be sure to kill the horse under him."

The rancher did not think of his horse. His only thought was of his wife. He had left her sleeping—dazed by the fearful calamity that had overwhelmed her. The shock had seemed to deprive her of reason, but he had hoped she would be all right when she awoke. And now—

"A million cusses on thet devil as is makin' all this trouble! He shell suffer fer this! Oh, the fiend! He means ter crush me and bring me ter ruin! Even ef he is risen from the dead, I will know no peace till he is brought ter doom!"

On, on! Mercilessly he plied the bloody spurs! He had no thought for the already cruelly overdriven horse. What was the life of a dumb creature to him, then!

As darkness spread over the plain the bright stars came out in the blue field of heaven. A cool breeze swept the open land, fanning the face of the flying rancher. The heat of day was banished by the soft breath of night.

Away, away dashed the noble horse! The rider strained his eyes to catch a glimpse of the light which he felt would be streaming from the windows of the ranch. He knew he must pass over many miles before he could see that light, still he peered through the darkness in search of it.

Behind him came a pursuer who shouted and called in vain. Zeb Horn heard no sound save the steady beat of his horse's feet and the wild clamor of the tumultuous heart in his bosom.

"It almost seems as ef God hed turned ag'in' me!" he groaned. "No more am I out o' one trouble then another follers! Ev'rythin' wuz

goin' on so smooth, an' ther gals wuz 'bout ter be merried. Now look at it!

"On, ole boss, on!" This is only crawlin'! W'at's got inter ye thet ye can't go no faster? Oh, great heavens! Shell I never git thar?"

Mike after mile was covered. The horse began to puff in a manner that plainly told it was failing. Had Zeb Horn been in his right mind, he would have taken warning and drawn rein; but, as it was, he heeded not the hoarse breathing of the poor creature. Still he plied the bloody spur, still he urged it on by his cries.

To the left a herd of cattle suddenly went thundering away into the dusky gloom, stampeded by the horse and rider. Zeb heeded them not. What cared he if the stampede cost him a dozen long-horns! Cattle were nothing then; his thoughts were still of his wife.

"It'll kill her! it'll kill her!" he groaned again and again. "She kin never stan' it! Oh, God! w'at hev I ever done thet I sh'd hev ter endoor all this?"

He knew he must soon see the ranch, and he arose in the stirrups. Beneath him the good horse staggered like a drunken thing, but he heeded it not. He strained his eyes to see the light, but it did not greet his vision.

"Frum the top o' ther next rise!" he cried. "I'll see it thar!"

Again the reeking spurs were driven into the blood-dripping flanks, and, with a cry that was almost human in agony, the animal shot forward like the wind, seeming as fresh as ever.

But it was the last effort—a dying spurt.

Before the crest of the swell was reached the poor creature began to stagger again. In vain Zeb applied the spur. Slower and slower moved the horse. At last the rancher suspected the truth and freed his feet from the stirrups.

None too soon.

With a last despairing groan, the good horse lay down to die.

Alighting on his feet, Zeb ran onward toward the crest of the swell, leaving the animal where it fell, not even giving it a second thought.

The top of the rise was reached, and a cry passed the ranchman's lips, for he saw the light for which he was looking. Far, far across the plain it shone like a fallen star.

Not a moment did he pause. His horse was dead, but his legs were still beneath him. Straight toward the ranch he ran, his teeth clinched, his breast heaving.

Even as he had driven his horse till it fell dead beneath him, he gave no thought to himself and his strength. On and on he ran, in no way trying to husband his powers. He stumbled and fell, but quickly scrambled to his feet, a gasping cry of rage alone escaping him.

How slowly he approached that light! It almost seemed to retreat before him. He groaned with rage and dismay. Breathing hoarsely, he still ran madly on.

Within his heart there had been one wild hope, even though he had not dared admit as much to himself. It was, that he might find his wife at the ranch. It was that that caused him to kill his horse; and now that faint spark of hope was still spurring him on.

His heart beat like a trip-hammer; his blood boiled in his veins. Yes, the light was nearer. He could see that, but still he seemed to approach it at a snail's pace. His head seemed ready to burst with a terrible pressure. Could he hold out to reach the ranch?

"I will! I will!"

Savagely he ground the words beneath his clinched teeth. With an exertion of will-power, he flung off the weakness that threatened to overcome him, and for a time he ran forward as swiftly as at first.

But he was not made of iron. Once more the fearful pressure returned to his head; ringing bells sounded in his ears; the ranch light danced before his eyes. He staggered even as his horse had staggered just before it fell to rise no more. Beneath his feet the earth seemed to rock and roll.

The ranch was not far away, for he could see its dark outlines when that light was not flashing and gleaming before his eyes. What a strange light it was! Now and then it would seem to burst like a rocket, and its colors changed to a dozen different hues. What were those sounds? Guns! They seemed to explode in his very ears. He fancied a battle was going on at the ranch, but it was all fancy.

Down to the ground he fell, and for a moment he lay there stunned. That fall seemed to banish the wild fancies that had filled his head, but when he arose his heart was in his throat and he gasped for breath.

Tearing open his shirt-collar, he ran on again, still staggering. He could now see the ranch close at hand.

"Betsey!" he gasped—"Betsey, be you thar?"

The door opened and a female figure appeared in it—a figure bearing a light in hand.

"Great God! it's her!" he whispered, with a wild thrill of joy.

And then he saw his mistake.

It was the Irish girl, Norah!

He nearly fell when he made the discovery, but he managed to reel forward till he reached the circle of light. The girl uttered a cry:

"Haoly S'int's! it's th' masther!"

"Betsey!" he asked—"Betsey, my wife—whar is she?"

"Gone," was the reply—"gone. Hivven aounly knows whar."

Then he fell heavily to the ground and lay like one dead.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DESERTER'S DANGER.

THREE days later a roughly-dressed and heavily bearded horseman was approaching Red Spur Ranch. The man's hat was pulled low down, but from beneath a drooping brim peered two keen, piercing eyes. He was a man of good proportions and sat in the saddle like one born to command.

Taking the trail that led through the little mesquite grove, he kept his eyes well about him, seeming constantly on the alert. However, he was not challenged till he was quite near the ranch, then a voice called:

"Will yees be afther haoldin' oop a bit noow? The lukes av you Oi nivver saw b'fore, an Oi w'u'dn't moind axin' av yez name an' business. Pull oop, Oi say. Oi hiv th' dhrop sure as me name is Moike Maloney."

A red-headed Irishman, holding a cocked and leveled rifle, confronted the stranger, seeing which, the bearded horseman pulled up promptly.

"Thit's roight," nodded Mike, with satisfaction. "Av yez think ye kin roon th' guntlit jist thry th' loikes av it! Av Oi phull th' thrigger av this goon, it will bring twinty min ter me soide. D'yez moind thot noow?"

"Thet's all right, Irish," spoke the horseman, in a hoarse tone. "Thar hain't nary cause fer threats. Jest you look out ye don't make no mistakes an' shoot someboddy with thet thar gun. You do handle it powerful keerless like."

"Av yez doon't be afther kickin' oop a bobby, ivverything will be all roight. Who are yez, noow, an' whut d'yez warnt hear?"

"I am hyer ter see Miss Kart Horn," was the reply.

"An' whut business c'u'd ye be afther hivin' wid the leetle gel, Oi'd loike ter know?"

"Thet hain't nuthin' ter you, Irish. It's ther gal I wants ter see."

"Well, Oi doon't know as Miss Kate w'u'd care ter say th' loikes av yez."

"She will be mighty glad ter see me when she knows w'at my business is."

Mike surveyed the horseman from head to feet.

"Thit sounds all roight," he slowly admitted, "but O'im a nagur ef Oi loike th' looks av yez!"

The stranger made a gesture of impatience.

"Come, come!" he cried, "I can't stay here all day chinnin' with you!"

"Thin Oi reckon yez hed better tarn roound an' let me see how fur Oi kin kape me oies on yer back. Go on wid yez, noow!"

"Dern it all!" cried the man. "I hev rid fifty mile ter git a word with Miss Horn, an' I'll not be bluffed out by an Irishman! It is fer her interest thet she heur w'at I'm goin' ter tell her. You hain't befriending her by refusin' ter let me see her. I bring word from Zeb Horn—her father."

Once more Mike took a survey of the horseman, but even then he was not satisfied. It was only after nearly half an hour of haggling that the sturdy Irishman consented to tell Kate there was a stranger who wished to see her. When he did so, he called another cowboy and set him to guard the horseman while intelligence was carried to Little Kit.

"She won't be afther seein' av yez at all, at all," asserted Mike. "Ye may as well make up yer moind ter thot. It's oonly ter git rid av yez thit Oi hiv decided ter tell her. It's th' grand bounce ye will be getthing whin Oi return, d'yez moind thot, noow?"

The stranger made another gesture of impatience, but Mike moved away in a deliberate manner that was extremely exasperating.

However, he wore a decidedly crestfallen look when he returned.

"Oi hiv succaded in gitthing th' litttle gel ter say yez, though Oi hed a moighty harrud toime doin' av it," he declared. "An' av yez do any harrum ter her," was his added threat, "O'll hiv yez schkelp ef Oi hiv ter folly yez ter Barnagat an' back! Jist be afther makin' a note av thot, noow?"

The stranger dismounted from his horse, a satisfied chuckle sounding in his beard.

"Ye got clean knocked out this time, Irish," he said, with unconcealed delight. "Jest show me ther way to Miss Horn, will ye?"

Grumblingly, Mike did so. And his last word at the door was a threat.

The stranger entered the room and made himself comfortable in an easy-chair. However, he was not compelled to wait long. Barely was he seated, when Kate Horn entered the room. Her face looked pale and sad, but there was an eager light in her eyes as she came forward.

The man arose to bow in a respectful manner, his wide brimmed hat in his hand.

"My father," spoke the girl. "Mike said you claimed to bring word of him."

"I do," and the man's voice sounded harsh and strained.

"He sent you?"

There was still doubt in the girl's face, but she clung to the hope that he spoke the truth.

The stranger shook his head.

"No, miss; Zeb Horn didn't send me. I kem of my own 'cord an' fashion."

A slight look of disappointment clouded her face.

"I hoped—I thought—"

She paused, staring at him in a searching manner. Evidently her scrutiny was successful in revealing something of a startling nature, for she started back, one hand outstretched, crying:

"Those eyes, those eyes! I know them!"

"And so you have penetrated my disguise," came calmly from the man's lips, and, lifting his hand he removed the false beard from his face.

Kate cried:

"Frank Cranston!"

It was in truth the deserter-lieutenant.

"Yes, Frank Cranston, the deserter," he said, a bitter smile on his lips, as he bowed low before her. "I did not mean to reveal my identity to you if the disguise stood the test, but I was forced to unmask."

She pressed one hand to her heart, her face and lips blanched, and for some time she was silent. He stood there before her, his eyes fixed on her face.

"On, what made you come here?" she finally exclaimed.

"I could not keep away," he replied. "I wished to see you once more before I go away."

"Before—you—go—away? Are you going away?"

"Yes."

"And you did not come to bring me word of my father?"

"Nothing more than that he has pursued the outlaws into Arizona. I took that means to see you."

"You are in great peril here."

"I know it."

"The cowboys have all sworn to capture and deliver you to the soldiers if they have a chance. You came near killing Hal—"

"I would to God I had succeeded!"

"Mr. Cranston!"

"Not for my sake, but for yours. I will acknowledge I hate the man, but I do not hate him enough to wish to have his life on my hands. But to save you from him, I would kill him!"

She put out her hand with a gesture that commanded him to stop.

"You are very thoughtful, Mr. Cranston," with evident sarcasm, although she tried to conceal it; "but you have made a great mistake. I fear you do not understand your own heart. I think it must be as much your hatred for Hal as anything else that drives you on. Already your mad acts are beginning to cause me to regard you more in the light of an enemy than anything else. I did think you my friend—"

"And your friend I am—your humble, sincere friend! For your sake I would do anything—I would go through fire and water! For you—"

"Stop! I cannot listen to such talk! If you continue to speak thus, I shall leave the room!"

He bowed, his lips compressed, his manner showing he was making an effort to hold himself in restraint. For some moments silence fell between them. Finally, she said:

"And so you are really going away?"

An inclination of his head was the answer, for he did not dare trust his voice just then.

"You should have gone long ago. Every day you remain in this section you are in peril."

"I know it."

His voice was hoarse and unnatural.

"More than once you have narrowly escaped capture or death."

"And once, I escaped death through your bravery. Miss Horn, how can I repay you for that brave act?"

"Repay me? I was paid a thousand times before it was done. Oh, Mr. Cranston! it is I who can never recompense you for what you have done for me."

"I ask no recompense—I cannot! If things were different— But what is the use to think of what can never be? I have suffered tortures enough thinking, thinking! At times it has seemed as if I would go mad! And I am all to blame! I have brought disgrace and sorrow to my poor father, who was so proud of his boy! All the future looks black, black!"

She pitied him then, and would have given much had she been able to cheer him in some way. But his future did indeed look barren and black. As quickly as the mood had come upon him he flung it aside.

"I am not here to speak of such things to you," he said. "I came to warn you and to bid you farewell."

"To warn me? Of what?"

"Of the man whom you trust."

"Don't!" she cried. "I do not wish to hear you speak of him!"

"But I must, for it is my duty. You can be sure it is not a pleasure. Miss Horn, I am sure he is one of the outlaws."

She lifted one hand above her head, the palm turned toward him.

"Hold! You are sure? What proof have you?"

"The evidence of his acts."

"Nothing more?"

"That is enough."

"You have never seen him with the outlaws?"

"No."

Her hand fell.

"I must refuse to listen to your words. You have no evidence other than your belief and your prejudice. You hate him, as you have confessed, and your hatred has led you to believe him an outlaw. I know he is nothing of the kind! If you wish to still hold my friendship, you will let this matter drop."

There was a hard look on his face, but he bowed.

"Have it so," he said. "Still I fancy you will not forget my words."

"I wish I might! There is one thing I cannot understand. Hal told me he met you in a fair duel, and I know him to be a dead shot. Still you were not touched, and he came near being fatally wounded. Why was that?"

For a moment Cranston was tempted to tell the truth, then he felt it would surely cause her to think the more of Hal if she knew he had fired into the air. Had he believed Hal an honest man, let the result be what it might, he would have told the facts concerning the encounter; but, as it was, he would tell nothing that could make the cowboy seem more like a hero in the sight of the girl they both loved.

"Why was it?" he slowly repeated. "It must have been because I had the steadier nerve. He was convulsed with passion, and I did not even hear the hum of his lead."

She looked at him queerly, inquiringly, almost as if she doubted he had given the true reason: but he met her gaze so frankly she could not think he was deceiving her. She came forward and held out her hand, speaking earnestly:

"I am glad you are going away, for I have feared you and Hal would meet again. Such a meeting would be almost certain to mean death for one or both of you."

With sudden cruelty, he cried:

"Little you would care if it were I who was killed! You would—"

She did not speak, but her look of reproach silenced him. He fell back a step, but still clung to her hand.

"You did not mean that," came softly from her lips, after a time.

"No, no!" he murmured; "I did not! I did not! Forgive me, Miss Horn! I scarcely knew what I said. I was not just, for I know you have a kind and noble heart."

"I thank you, Mr. Cranston. I knew you would repent your words. I did not feel offended, for you have done too much for me and I am too greatly in your debt to—"

"There, there! Please do not speak of that again! One look from those blue eyes—one whispered word from those lips would be ample payment for anything I could do! You do not know—you cannot understand my feelings for you!"

She gave him a warning look, for he was again treading on forbidden ground. He stopped abruptly, but went on, speaking hurriedly:

"It seems impossible for me to keep silent on that point. I know not why it is, but when I least mean to speak about it, I find myself doing so. You must not think too hard of me for it. It is my heart—my restless heart! This may be our last meeting—Kate. When I leave you, you may never see me more. I am going into Old Mexico, where I intend to live under another name. But, though we never meet again, you will be ever with me in memory. You cannot know how often I think of you now. How often I think of you! When am I not thinking of you? Waking or sleeping, you are constantly in my mind. I dream of you by day and night, but the dream is ever a sad one. Had we never met—But then I do not repent it. I have learned what love is, and even though my heart is left empty and desolate, the remembrance of that delicious emotion—"

At that moment Norah thrust her head in at the door, crying excitedly:

"Haowly hivvins! Miss Kate, theer is a whole rigimint av mounted sojers a-comin' this way as fasht as they kin roide! Whariver kin the m'anin' av it be, Oi dunno?"

"Soldiers?" gasped Kate, her face turning very pale. "Are you sure, Norah?"

"Sure as fate, Miss Kathie."

"They are after me," came quietly from Frank Cranston's lips, as he drew a self-acting revolver. "In some way, they have got on track of me; but they shall have a warm time taking me. I am not ready to die; but, if die I must, I will sell my life at a good price. I will never be shot like a dog, with a bandage over my eyes!"

CHAPTER XV.

BLUFFING BLUE-COATS.

It was plain the deserter-lieutenant meant to fight, for the flush that had sprung to his cheeks and the gleam in his eyes told as much. As he had declared, he meant to sell his life at a good price; it would cost them dear to secure his bullet-riddled body.

A thrill of admiration passed over the girl as she saw how coolly Cranston prepared to meet his fate; but the thought of the bloody encounter that would follow when he was discovered filled her with fear and dread.

"It must not be!" she cried. "They shall not find you here. I will secrete you."

"Where?"

"There is a secret room in this old building. Only father and I know of it. Follow me."

For a moment he hesitated.

"It seems cowardly—"

"But it is not. Those men may be your former companions. Will you stay and have the life of any one of them on your hands? It is your duty to avoid an encounter, if possible!"

"That is true," he confessed. "Lead the way."

She did so, and he followed her closely. Up the stairs they went, just as the troopers clattered up to the front of the building and there came a resounding knock on the door.

"Open, open!" was the cry.

There was no response for a time, and again they knocked loudly.

"Open this door, or we will break it down."

Mike Maloney appeared.

"Arrah, noow," he cried, "whut kin ye be afther, makin' all av thot noise aroound heur?"

"We demand entrance here," asserted the lieutenant in command.

"An' is thot th' way av it, Oi'd loike ter know? By what roight do yez demand it? Oi'm thinkin' this is th' hooouse av a p'aceable marn. G'larn' wid yez!"

"Surround the house, and search the outbuildings," was the command the officer gave to his men. "We are almost certain the deserter is here, and we must not let him escape us now. I will force a way into the house, if they utterly refuse me entrance."

"Begorra! it may be a warrum toime ye will hiv in dooin' av thot, noow!" nodded Mike. "There are a few av th' b'ys aboot, an' we'll make it warrum fer yez if th' misthress ounly says fer us ter."

"You will not make fools of yourselves," said the lieutenant, sternly. "We mean no harm to any one who belongs about this ranch, but we have followed a deserter here. Leastwise, we believe he came here."

Now Mike was anything but pleased by the imperious manner of the officer, and the young Irishman took a notion to bother him a little, although he fancied the man the Blue-coats were in search of would be found by them in the end.

"Was there not a man rode up here a short time ago?" asked the lieutenant, as he saw his men scattering to search the outbuildings, as ordered.

"Faith, an' thur wur."

"I thought as much. What kind of a looking man?"

"Well, he looked jest aboot loike mesilf, av ye p'laze."

"Like you?"

"Yis, yer moightyness."

"He wore a slouched hat and his face was covered with a heavy beard?"

"Who toold you thot, noow? Is thot th' way Oi look? Och, hone! thot is not th' way Oi look at all, at all!"

"But that is a description of him?"

"An' d'yez soay so, yer riverence? He did not look loike thot at all, at all."

The lieutenant gave Mike a sharp and savage scrutiny.

"Look here," he said, sternly, "don't try to lie to me, you bog-trotter!"

"Go on, ye blatherskite of an odamahoon yez!" retorted Mike, in sudden rage. "Go take yez face away wid yez b'fore it makes me sick abed intoirely! Loie ter yez! Ye don't know how ter tr'ate a gintleman dacent, yer Yankee scarecrow av a fiddler's pup! Oi'd loike ter git a crack at yez wid me fist! It's an illigant pair av black oes Oi'd be afther givin' yez D'yez moind thot, noow?"

"Careful, careful!" fumed the officer. "Do you know who you are addressing, sir?"

"Divvil a bit, an' divvil a bit do Oi warnt ter! It's th' truth Oi war tellin' av yez, an' ye go fur ter accuse me av lyellin'! Thur wur a yare thot rid up ter th' dure a short toime ago, but nivver a bit av whiskeys did he wear over th' face av him save a bit av a shtraw-colored b'ard oonder his chin, joost loike this av moine. He did'n't hiv on any slouch hat at all, at all; but his hat looked loike this one Oi wear. An' by me faith, his hair wur ivery bit as red as moine!"

"That is not the man we are after."

"An' doon't Oi know thot, noow! It wur mesilf! Oi his been oout ter take a bit av a survey aroound th' cuntry."

With this, Mike bowed very profoundly to the officer, grinning in a way that seemed to proclaim he thought himself more than even for the insult he had endured.

"Get away, you numskull!" shouted the lieutenant, his rage bursting forth. "Your smartness will get you into trouble some day!"

Then he turned and renewed his assault on the door.

"Open this door, or I will break it down!" he shouted.

He leaned forward with his shoulder against the door, as if about to carry out his threat, and of a sudden the door was jerked open, allowing him to fall sprawling over the step. He gathered himself up, with a smothered exclamation of anger, and found he was confronted by an Irish girl, who was convulsed with laughter at his sudden downfall.

"Lift yer fate a troifle higher, misther," advised Norah. "Ye sh'u'd always take a look at th' roise av a schtep whin ye go fer ter inter a house."

The chagrined and angered officer drew himself to his full height, noticing four of his men were at his back, and demanded:

"Where is the head of this house?"

"Oi doon't wonder ye are lookin' afther a head," laughed the girl; "fer th' wan yiz hiv is so poorly balanced thit ye can't kape on yer fate."

The officer's face darkened.

"Will you answer my question?" he demanded. "Where is the head of this house?"

A light footfall sounded on the stair, and a graceful figure appeared.

"At present, I am the head of the house," said Kate Horn's pleasant voice. "What can I do for you, sir? There seems to be a great commotion down here about something or other."

The lieutenant removed his cap and bowed low with all the overpoliteness of a man who considers himself a decided lady-killer.

"I beg your pardon, miss," he entreated. "I regret the necessity that compels me to disturb you; but, to tell my reason, a certain man—a deserter—was seen riding to this house less than an hour ago. We have followed him here, and it is necessary that we should search the premises."

Kate straightened up, haughtily.

"Search the premises!" she cried. "Who has given you leave to do that?"

"Ahem! hem!" coughed the lieutenant, in confusion. "No one has given us leave, but I felt sure you would not refuse."

"How could you feel sure, sir? It is not an agreeable thing to have a pack of soldiers tramping through one's house. I suppose my word that the one for whom you are looking is not about the house will be quite sufficient?"

She did not wait for him to reply, but went on swiftly, seemingly becoming more angry:

"I see you hesitate, as if you thought I would tell you an untruth! Very well, sir! Search the house! You will not find the one you are looking for."

"But—but—I am willing to take your pledge that he is not here—quite willing, miss, I assure you."

"Why didn't you say so at first? I will give you no such pledge now! Search the place, and then you will be satisfied! The house is yours for the next thirty minutes. Surely that is time enough?"

"Quite—quite time enough," stammered the officer. "But—but—"

"Go ahead," said the girl, drawing a handsome watch from her bosom and glancing at the face of it.

The lieutenant hesitated, his face fiery red, then he made a motion to the men at the door, and the search began. Kate also made a significant motion to Mike and Norah, and the faithful servants followed the soldiers about the place and kept close watch of them. Mike took particular delight in watching the officer as a cat watches a mouse, appearing to suspect his intention of stealing something valuable.

Kate ascended the stairs and stood by the door of a certain room, when the men approached.

"I trust you will not ask to enter here," she said, fixing her eyes on the lieutenant's face.

He started and looked at her sharply.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"Because this is my sister's room, and she is ill in bed with a headache. I will give you my word she is the only person in the room, or any of the closets connected therewith."

"That is quite enough," bowed the officer. "Had you said as much about the house, we would not have searched it at all."

"But I wished you to be thoroughly satisfied, sir. You still have fifteen minutes more to complete the search."

"Which is more than we need."

Kate descended the stairs, and, a few minutes later, the officer and those with him came down, failure apparent on their faces. At the same time two others came up from the cellar, and announced the deserter was not below.

"He does not seem to be about the house," confessed the lieutenant; "but some of the men may have found him in the out-buildings."

But Frank Cranston was not found. However, a saddled and bridled horse, that had apparently been ridden far and fast, was discovered, and the lieutenant made aware of the fact.

"An' is it me own horrus ye hiv foonnd?" cried Mike. "An' noow, perhaps, ye will schtill be afther thinkin' Oi didn't take a roide a short toime ago? Oh, it's a loikely mess av gossoons ye be! Av Oi—"

"Mike!"

That word from Kate was enough.

"Oi beg yez pardon, miss," he said, bowing low. "It's me toongue Oi nivver wur able ter kape bechune me tathe excipe whin Oi tried ter take a boight out av it."

The search proved fruitless all round, but the young officer seemed reluctant to leave. Kate saw this, but she seemed quite at ease, thinking any apparent desire to hasten him away might arouse his suspicion. He would have remained and chatted with her a bit, but she showed no inclination to talk.

"I hope you will pardon me for the trouble to which I have put you?" he said.

She simply bowed.

"I was simply obeying orders," he declared. "My instructions were to watch this place, as Cranston might visit it. One of my men believed he saw the deserter coming here, but, of course, he may have been mistaken. I am sorry to have disturbed you for nothing. Now I will bid you good-day."

Again he removed his cap and bowed very low. She acknowledged the salute, and in another moment the lieutenant was in the saddle. At the head of his men, he rode down the trail.

As the troopers were passing beneath the shade of the mesquite trees they met a horseman who was riding toward the ranch. They looked at him curiously, for his torn and soiled clothes had once been suitable for the finest parlor in the land. His face was haggard and stern, but he sat in the saddle like one born there.

It was Hurricane Hal.

CHAPTER XVI.

COWBOY AND DESERTER.

THE foreman of the Red Spur Ranch returned the scrutiny of the soldiers, a singular look on his face. It seemed as if he looked in vain for some one among them.

As Hal rode on to the ranch and the Blue-coats disappeared in the midst of mesquite grove, the foreman was seen and recognized by Mike. The faithful Irishman rushed forward to greet his master, crying:

"Oh, Masther Hal! is it really ye thit me oies do behold? Begorra! Oi kin scursely belave it!"

"It is I, Mike, what is left of me. I am pretty near dead, and that is a fact. Take care of my horse."

With the frank freedom and familiarity that had ever characterized his bearing toward those beneath him, he grasped Mike's hand and shook it warmly. He was one of those men who could treat those under him in a familiar manner and still retain their respect and esteem, a most difficult thing to do.

Straight toward the door of the ranch he strode, but he knew not Kate had seen him and sunk half-fainting into a chair.

"I must be strong! I must be strong!" she whispered. "He must never know! Be still, wildly throbbing heart! Oh, I am so weak! My strength is all gone! I must be strong!"

She heard his step at the door; he entered; stood before her; they were face to face.

For some moments not a word was spoken by either, but they gazed straight into each other's eyes. In the hearts of both, love and pride were fighting a fierce battle—and pride conquered!

"So you have returned?"

She forced herself to utter the words, but they sounded strange and unnatural.

He bowed, replying:

"I have."

That was all. How cold and formal he seemed, standing before her as he did, hat in hand, his face stern, almost repellent! She felt a cold chill run over her, as if an icy breath from the Polar Regions had touched her bosom.

Once more they stood in silence for a little while, but silence was unendurable. To the girl the sound of Hal's voice, harsh and stern though it might be, was more welcome.

"I—I thought you might be—with the others," she said.

He shook his head.

"No."

"Have you not been with them at all?"

"No."

She shivered a little, although the room was uncomfortably warm.

"And you have not seen father since that night?"

"Yes; I have seen him from a distance."

"He could not understand why you failed to return to the ranch with the others."

"I stayed behind to watch for the person who shot the arrow that bore the message."

"You found him?"

"No. The gloom must have aided him in coming from his place of concealment and giving me the slip."

"And ever since?"

"Do not ask me about that!" he cried, almost desperately. "I felt that I could not come back here, then!"

"And mother in the hands of those inhuman wretches!" reproachfully.

"I did not forget that—do not think I forgot it! I felt that I might be able to do as much for her alone as with the others, and I have been seeking for her all these days. All! They seem like many, although I know they are only three."

There was something in his voice that touch-

ed her heart, and she turned toward him, her soul in her eyes; but at that very moment he turned away. She tried to speak his name, but the word froze on her lips.

"Where is Frank Cranston?"

The question came like a thunderbolt, and she recoiled before it.

"Frank Cranston?"

Mechanically she repeated the name, the color once more fleeing her cheeks and lips.

"Yes; what have you done with him? Do not deny he is here, for I know he is."

Then a great flood of bitterness surged through her heart. What right had he to speak thus to her? It was as if the very name of Cranston conjured up the barrier they had built between themselves.

"Know he is here?" she echoed. "Well, if you know so much, I have nothing to say."

He took a step forward as if he would clutch her wrist, his eyes blazing. And then she feared him! A thrill of terror ran over her; she shrunk away, a low scream coming from her lips. That checked him. He understood her fear, and he paused without touching her.

"You do not deny he is here," came slowly from his lips.

"No." She whispered the word.

"But those soldiers did not find him! What have you done with him?"

She suddenly straightened up before him, her blue eyes flashing in turn.

"You have no right to question me! I refuse to answer!"

It was his turn to fall back.

"I expected as much! What else could I expect? It is well my eyes were opened before it was too late! You have heard what I had to say of that man, and again I repeat that warning. Although you can never again be anything to me, I do not wish to see your life ruined by that wretch."

"Have no fear of that."

"But I have. I would like to face him! I wish he were here!"

"I am here, Jackson Ballou!"

Hurricane Hal wheeled, his hand on a revolver. In the doorway stood Frank Cranston, and a cocked revolver in his hand was leveled straight at the cowboy's head.

"Hold hard, Ballou!" cried the deserter-lieutenant, hatred written on his face. "Attempt to draw that weapon and I will stretch you dead on the floor! My aim will not fail me this time!"

But that threat was not enough to check the young Hotspur.

"Then shoot, you dog!" he shouted, jerking out the weapon.

With a shriek, Kate flung herself between the two men, although the act nearly cost her life. Barely was Cranston able to restrain his impulse to press the trigger, and, had he done so, she would have fallen, pierced by the bullet.

"No, no, no!" she screamed, wildly holding out her hands to them. "For God's sake, do not shoot! Would you murder each other before my eyes?"

That was enough. The first mad impulse was checked, and the danger of a bloody encounter swiftly passed. Hurricane Hal thrust his revolver back into its holster.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Horn," came from his mustache-shaded lips. "I quite forgot myself for a moment. That must be my excuse."

Cranston lowered his weapon, but stood with it clutched in his hand.

"And my excuse must be what I heard just before I appeared at this door. He wished for me; I came."

"When I spoke those words I forgot there would be a lady present to witness what might occur. If she were not here—"

"What then?"

"Stop, stop!" cried Kate, although she was almost fainting with the terror of the moment before. "You are still forgetting yourselves!"

"That is true," confessed Hal, with a bow. "Again I beg your pardon. We have terrified you, for which we should be ashamed. Permit me; accept this chair."

She was only too glad to sink into the chair, for her shaking limbs could not have supported her much longer. Now that the peril seemed past, almost every bit of strength had departed from her. She thrilled at the touch of Hal's hand, but he fancied she shrunk from him.

"She has grown to fear and despise me!" was his bitter thought. "And all on account of this man! He has ruined our happiness; but the day of retribution may come. I spared him once, but next time—"

If ever Frank Cranston was beneath the muzzle of Hurricane Hal's revolver again he need look for no mercy.

Turning, Hal faced the deserter-lieutenant, and for several moments the two men fought a duel of eyes—a duel that ended in a draw.

"I heard you speaking of me as I was about to pass the door," spoke Cranston. "If you have anything to say about me, I trust you will say it to my face."

"You may be sure I will say nothing behind your back I do not dare repeat to your face," was the cowboy's reply. "I have accused you

of being a villain as well as a deserter, and I repeat the charge."

"Which amounts to nothing, coming as it does from your lips. In turn, I have told Miss Horn I believe you an outlaw and in league with this newly risen Red Hand."

"It is well for you to make such a charge to cover your own crookedness. You probably knew such a charge would be made against yourself, and you sought to counteract it. You are a deserter—a hunted man—and you are in danger so long as you remain in this vicinity, yet you do not go away. If you had not friends, you would not stay. Those Marauders have promised you their comradeship, and you have become one of them."

"You lie!"

With difficulty, Hal retained command of himself.

"You know you are safe in saying that before this lady. Were we alone—"

"We can be alone as soon as you choose. From this room we can go to a spot where this affair will be settled at once. Will you come?"

"Gladly!"

But Kate was on her feet once more.

"For shame!" she cried. "Again you have forgotten yourselves! Do you think I will consent to such a thing? Let me tell you now that if ever one of you harms the other, from that moment he and I are strangers!"

It was plain she meant exactly what she said. If there was trouble between the two men, they would be both in danger of forfeiting her friendship and esteem.

"I might even go as far as that to save you from that fellow's plots, Miss Horn," asserted Cranston.

But his words seemed to arouse her still more.

"That is enough! I am well able to take care of myself, at present. I thank you for your kind intentions, but you should see you are making yourself obnoxious to me."

Cranston bowed, and of a sudden, Hal turned toward the door.

"I fancy I am an intruder here, at best," he said, with bitterness. "I came back for more suitable clothes than these, little thinking I might find another here who seems to have stolen the place that should be mine. Miss Horn, it seems you have chosen between us! I hope you may never regret your choice. Now I will bid you good-day!"

With a bow, he turned toward the door. She held out her hands to him, but he saw her not. She would have called him back, but she remembered that Frank Cranston's eyes were on her, and so she let him depart from the room. When he was gone, she sunk down in the chair once more, a terrible faintness at her heart and a black cloud before her eyes.

Frank Cranston saw how drawn and ghastly was her face, and he sprang to her side, but, lifting a hand, with a great effort, she motioned him away.

"Kate—Miss Horn!" he exclaimed, affrighted; "you are ill! you are fainting."

"No!" she hoarsely whispered. "Go away! Leave me!"

But he did not obey.

"I cannot leave you thus," he passionately declared. "Do not drive me away in anger."

Her lips moved, but no sound issued from them. This filled him with still greater terror, and for a moment, he almost fancied she was dying. With a low cry, he fell on his knees at her side, catching her hand.

"Kate, Kate!" he panted; "speak to me. What is the matter? Oh, God! you look so strange! Can I do nothing for you? I would lay down my life, if it were necessary. I love you! I love you! Great Heaven! what have I done?"

With a suddenness that was astounding, all her strength came back to her, and she sprang to her feet, her eyes blazing, her figure atremble with anger, as she cried:

"What have you done? I will tell you what you have done! You have ruined my life! you have come between me and the only man I ever loved. You have turned him against me! What have you done? What have you not done? And you dare speak to me of love. Go—get out of my sight. I hate you, hate you, hate you!"

CHAPTER XVII.

WHO IS CAPTAIN RED HAND?

ZEB HORN was thoroughly disheartened. Four days had passed and Mrs. Horn was still in the hands of the outlaws. Worse than that, the trail of the bandits had been lost and the party of searchers were adrift in the Gila Mountains. They fancied the retreat of the band could not be far away, but they had no clew to guide them to it.

Old True Blue did his best to cheer the rancher.

"We're goin' ter find them critters sooner or later, Zeb," he declared. "W'en we do find 'em, we'll make 'em sweat, by gosh."

"But there is no tellin' w'at may happen ter Betsey afore we finds 'em," groaned the distressed husband. "She wuzn't in her right mind ter

start with, an' she may jest die o' craziness. Pore betsey."

"Don't yeou give up, old pard. I'm goin' aout on a hunt all by myself neow, an' I mean ter find suthin' afore I kem back—mark that. Them darned imps of sin hain't fur erway, an' w'en we dew find 'em we'll make ther fur fly, by thutteration. Don't yeou fergit I'm standin' by yeou ter ther end, Zeb. I hain't fergot old times."

The rancher held out his hand, which Old True clasped warmly.

"Thankee, Truman, thankee!" said Zeb, huskily. "I know you are ther white stuff; but thar's Jedson o' ther Cross Bar, he 'lows he must git back ter look arter his place, an' he's goin' ter take his three men with him. Thar's Sackett o' ther Tray, he's goin' with Jedson, an' he'll take his two men. Thet'll reduce our crowd by seven good fightin' men."

"Jest yeou keep 'em tell I git back," urged Old True. "Mebbe I'll have er clew fer us then. I'm goin' neow."

Without allowing any one but Zeb to be aware of it, the Trusty slipped away. He left his horse behind, for he knew the animal would be of little use to him climbing the broken land by which they were surrounded. He could do muck better afoot.

Despite his age, Old True Blue was still as strong and sure-footed as a youth. His eyes were keen, his nerves steady and his heart true as steel. In border parlance, he was a man to "tie to."

"Dunno jest as thar's any double work goin' on," he muttered, as he swung himself along; "but things seem 'tarnal strange at times. Ef Thar's er traitor with aour crowd, I'm baound ter find him aout, and w'en I do that—wa-al, it'll go 'tarnal hard with ther skunk!"

It was early morning, and the old man had been refreshed by a good night's sleep, so he tripped along lightly, feeling that a tramp of fifty miles would be a small task. There was a certain section of the mountainous land within a dozen miles of the place where the searchers had camped for the night that Old True had never ventured into, and he had a great desire to thoroughly explore it.

"I cal'late thar'd be some good places fer ther aoutlaws ter hide thar in Satan's Section," he muttered, speaking to himself. "That's er 'tarnal good name fer it—Satan's Section is. It's abaout ther wu'st kentry in this part of Arizony—or ther wu'st lied abaout."

It was high noon when he found himself in Satan's Section. And he discovered it was indeed a wild country. Only a person accustomed to hill-climbing could get along at all, and even then he would be in constant danger of breaking his neck by some terrible fall. On every hand loomed the barren peaks. The mountain-sides were seamed with mighty fissures, and the rocky crags hung insecurely above dark and terrible chasms.

The sun poured down with a heat that was simply suffocating, causing one to gasp for breath. Pitfalls were on every hand, and over all, mighty boulders had been strewn like hail-stones. In places the huge rocks entirely blocked some defile, being heaped one upon another to a great height. It seemed as if the gods had strewn the great boulders around as children in sport would cast handfuls of pebbles.

"Wa-al," drawled Old True, pausing on a height that overlooked a portion of the wild land, "I'm darned ef I wonder that they call this Satan's Section. Thar don't no trees ner nuthin' grow heur, only jest cactuses an' creosote bresh. It's jest abaout ther wu'st bit of land I know of anywhar, an' that's facts!"

After a long survey that revealed nothing but the wild land about him, he went onward once more. He seemed in a country of desolation, and it was lonely to an extreme that was terrible. He appeared the only human being in all that wild waste.

But he was not.

Old True had been seen, and further up the mountain three men crouched behind some rocks, anxiously awaiting his approach. Weapons were in the hands of two; the third held a coiled lasso ready for use.

A snare had been set for Old True.

The old man was crafty and shrewd, but he saw no sign to give him warning of the trap into which he was deliberately walking. The men kept well out of sight, trusting to their ears to time the approach of the Trusty.

When he had passed them, the fellow with the lasso arose, swung the noose about his head and made the cast.

It did not fail.

Down over Old True Blue's shoulders dropped the coil, his arms were pinned to his side and he was snatched off his feet. Then, with shouts of triumph, the three men flung themselves upon him.

"Hold ther critter down!" cried one. "We'll take him erlive ef we kin; but ef he seems like ter git erway, guv him his final dost!"

This did not keep the old man from struggling with all his strength, and, although his arms were pinioned to his sides, they found him no mean antagonist.

"Dern ther critter's feet!" cried one of the

three, dodging True's flying boots. "He don't seem likely ter keep 'em still a tall! Now I have 'em—Ough! Blazes!"

A kick alongside the head sent the fellow reeling backward.

"Plunk him ther knife!" he howled, snatching out a bright blade and leaping forward. "Dang sech a critter, say I! Let me tap him with this!"

"Hold thar, Sandy!" roared one of the others. "Don't ye go fer ter start a drap of blood frum him! We'll ketch him dead ter rights, fer we've got his han's solid. Lend a han' byer, you fool!"

Growling like an angry dog, the ruffian obeyed. For at least ten minutes Old True gave his assailants all they wanted to do.

"Gosh darn yer skins!" he gritted. "If I only hed my han's, I'd be match fer ther hull of ye—I w'u'd, by 'tarnal! Yeou hev ter jump on a critter frum abind; yeou don't meet him like ye wur men! Consarn yer picter's!"

At last they overcame him, and he was made fast, hands and feet. When this was done, the four lay panting on the ground.

"I tole ye be wuz er hard critter," said one of the three who had trapped Old True.

The Trusty gave a grunt.

"So that's yeou, is it, Spikey Joe?" he cried. "Waal, yeou are baound ter stretch er rope, hain't ye? Yeou allus hed er sneakin' face, but Zeb Horn wur fooled 'cause yeou made er purty good caowboy. I knowed yeou wur er belasted skunk!"

Spikey Joe laughed.

"It's well enough fer you ter talk thet now," he said, breathing heavily; "but you never dreamed I wuz ary derved thing but jest w'at I seemed. I fooled ye all, an' you feel almighty sore 'bout it."

"Wa-al, think so, ef it does yeou any good. Whut ye goin' ter do with me neow?"

"Haw! haw! haw!" the fellow coarsely laughed. "So ye're intrusted ter know w'at's goin' ter bekum of ye? Wal, thet hain't fer us ter say! I reckon we'll take ye 'fore ther cap'n, 'cordin' ter orders. Eh, pards?"

"Shore."

"He'll do w'at he derved pleases with ye."

Old True felt a thrill run over him. He was going to be taken before Captain Red Hand, and it was quite probable that would be in the retreat of the Marauders. Then, if he could only escape—

"I'll trust in God," was his innermost thought.

For a long time the men lay in the shadow of some rocks, recovering from the exertion that had covered them with perspiration. At length, they securely blindfolded Old True Blue, taking care to make the bandage so secure he could in no way see as much as a gleam of light. Then his feet were freed and he was assisted to arise.

"Now, if you break away, it will be ther wu'st fer you," declared Spikey Joe. "You'd only fall inter some kind of a hoel an' dash yer own brains out, so I reckon you'll know enough ter keep stiddy an' tromp erlong whar ye're led. Hey?"

"Go ahead with yeour funeral," replied the captive. "I'm goin' ter stay in ther procession 'thout makin' nary kick. I know my place, yeou bet!"

This reply was received with satisfaction by the men, and the party started.

Old True tried to keep track of their course in a measure, but he found the task a difficult, not to say impossible, one. After a time he gave it up entirely, only devoting himself to keeping on his feet, and he found that no easy task.

For more than an hour they advanced over a difficult path. The Trusty knew when they passed from the scorching heat of the sun to the cool depths of a canyon, and the relief was great. Deeper and deeper went the four till Old True began to fancy they were penetrating far down into the earth.

At length, they were hailed. After the exchange of a few words which the Trusty did not catch, they advanced once more. The veteran felt himself escorted into a building of some sort, then he was ordered to sit down. He did so, and was bound with his back to the wall. Then the bandage was removed from his eyes.

Looking around, Old True found himself in a cabin or hut built of timbers and stones. The presence of the timbers caused him to at once decide there must be a wooded section near at hand.

Was it night? Whether it was or not, a smoking lamp illumined the interior of the hut.

"It's a trick," thought the captive, "but it's er darned shaller one. I know it hain't late enough ter be night."

Then, as he looked around, he saw there was but one window to the hut, and, although this was wide open, scarce a ray of light entered by it.

"I reckon I understan' neow," he said, mentally. "This but is daown in ther bottom of some dark hoel, an' they have ter keep lighted up."

He had struck the truth.

Spikey Joe was bowing and grinning before him.

"Hyer ye be, Truman!" said the traitorous wretch. "I hopes ye'll feel quite ter home."

Nice cozy place, *this* is! You are made fast ter ther wall thar, an' thar you'll stick tell ther boss says fer ye ter be let loose. Savvy?"

The old man surveyed the rascal from head to feet.

"Yas, I savvy," he replied. "I dunno as I'll ever git loose at all, but thar's one thing I do kneow."

"Spit her out."

"I know thar's er rope waitin' fer yeour neck, you gosh darned skunk!"

Spikey Joe put his hands up to his throat and made a grimace.

"Mebbe thet's so," he confessed, soberly. "I know I'm er gone case, but I wants ye ter 'member one thing, True: I saved ye frum Jerky Jim's knife ter-day! He'd 'a' gi'n you ther length of ther blade, shore as shootin', ef I hedn't howled ter him. Ef I wuzn't tangled up in this 'tarnal mess, I'd like ter be an honest man; but I'm so deep thar hain't no gittin' out now. I'm a consarned outlaw, an' I 'low hangin' 's too good fer me!"

The veteran was amazed by these words. He could not understand why Spikey Joe should speak in such a manner, for he considered the man a rascal to the core—a ruffian without conscience. Had he made a mistake in the fellow?

Spikey seemed about to say something more, but suddenly made a gesture as if he heard some one approaching. Then he produced a black pipe and began to fill it from a huge square of tobacco.

While he was thus occupied, a masked man entered the hut.

It was the chief.

Spikey Joe made a rude salute, to which the leader of the outlaws replied with a gesture of dismissal. Bowing low, the outlaw left the room.

Folding his arms, Captain Red Hand stood and surveyed his captive. Through the twin holes in the black mask shone a pair of gleaming eyes that had made many a man quail, but Old True Blue met them squarely with an unflinching look.

After a brief silence, the chief of the outlaws spoke:

"Well, I have you," he said.

And Old True calmly answered:

"It locks that way, by gosh!"

"You are the man I have wished to see for some time."

"So? Wa-al, I have bin snoopin' araound lookin' fer yeou."

"I scarcely fancied you would come to me."

"Waal, I faound yeou wur'n't comin' ter me, an' so I thort I'd do ther t'other thing."

"Do you know me?"

"I s'pose yeou call yerself Cap'n Red Hand."

"And I am Captain Red Hand."

"In yer mind!"

"I do not wonder you doubt me. You believe I was killed and buried?"

"No, I don't."

"Ah?"

"I don't b'lieve *you* wur ever killed; but I know Cap'n Red Han' wur killed. More than that, I helped ter burry him."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the mask. "How you were fooled! I fooled them all! I tell you, man, I am Captain Red Hand! They thought me dead, but I am a hard man to kill."

"Yeou are the biggest gosh-darned liar I ever saw!" was Old True's fearless retort.

The outlaw made an impatient gesture.

"If I am not Captain Red Hand, who am I?"

"A darned skunk!"

"Have a care, old man!" came sternly from the chief's concealed lips. "If you do not bridle your tongue, I will have it cut out!"

Old True's eyes flashed.

"Go erhead, ef yeou want ter!" he retorted.

"I don't suspect anythin' better of yeou!"

"It will not be out of any feeling of compassion that I shall spare your tongue," asserted the mask; "but I wish to hear you beg for mercy some day. The time has not come. Just now, I mean to make use of you in another way. My vengeance can wait, although I long to see you groveling in the dirt at my feet."

"Whar I'll never be!"

"You may think so, but you are sure to come there."

"Not ef yeou torture me with fire!"

"It will be worse than fire. I mean to strike you through your boy of whom you are so proud. Ha! ha! That makes you start, as I thought it would!"

"You devil!"

Again the chief laughed.

"I will make you think I am a devil before I am done with you! I swore to come back from the dead—"

"It wur Sleek Saul as swore that."

"And I am Sleek Saul! Let me tell you something—something that will cause you to smile in derision, but something that is the truth: I am both Rebal Raguel and Saul, his brother. We were twins, and, although we knew it not in life, *each possessed but half a soul!*"

How the man's eyes gleamed as he made that startling declaration! Despite himself, Old True Blue felt a chill run over his body: but he laughed aloud.

"Whut do yeou take me fer?" he cried. "Do yeou think I am a fool?"

"I did not think you would believe," calmly confessed the outlaw chief; "but I spoke the truth, just the same. While living, we looked so much alike that one could not be told from the other. Between us a single soul was divided, each having but a half. We knew there was a bond that held us together—a bond stronger than the tie of flesh and blood—but we dreamed not what it was. Rebal Raguel—Captain Red Hand—died first, his body was buried, and his incomplete soul waited on the shore of the great unknown for its other part to come, that it might be made whole again. For more than two years it waited, then Saul Raguel was murdered—foully murdered! Do you hear?"

"I hain't deaf," was the Trusty's calm answer.

"You aided in his capture," continued the mask. "But for you he might have escaped, and been living to-day! That is why I hate you so! That is why I would see you writhe at my feet and beg for mercy! He swore to come back from the dead. When all the soul he possessed was united with that portion which had gone before, thus making one complete soul, it traveled on to the very gates of hell. There Satan met it—there it pleaded to turn back—to go back to earth and keep its pledge. Its wish was granted, and I am here!"

There was something terribly impressive about the man's manner, despite the absurdness of his words. Old True fancied the fellow was trying to work upon his feelings, but the old man was not easily frightened.

"Gosh all hemlock!" he drawled. "That's quite a yarn! Whut Sunday-School book did yeou git that out of? Yeou're about ther best liar I kneow of, by ther 'tarnal!"

"I knew you would not believe," said the chief, straightening to his full height. "Yet you are puzzled; I can see it in your face. You saw Rebal Raguel die, and you helped bury him?"

"Yas."

"You also saw Saul Raguel die—saw him riddled with bullets, after being hanged like a dog! From his body the wolves made a feast. You know that?"

"Yas."

"Then who am I?"

"Hanged ef I kneow!"

"Look at my face!"

Off came the mask, and the man bent forward, fixing his gleaming eyes on Old True's countenance.

"Look at my face!" he repeated. "Is it not that of the original Captain Red Hand?"

"Looks like it," acknowledged the Trusty.

"Is it not that of Sleek Saul?"

"Looks like it."

"It is, it is! I am both the brothers in one! That is something you cannot understand, but it is true. Satan allowed me to come back for the purpose of obtaining revenge on those I hate. When my revenge is complete, I must return to him!"

"Did yeou have me brought heur to tell me this mess of stuff?"

"Partly that. I did not hope to convince you, but I was determined you should know whom you were fighting. I am not a human being! Did you think me human? Poor fool! Bullets have no effect on me! They pass through my body without harming me! I am in the guise of a human being, but I am not! I am a fiend from down below! Do you hear? Ha, ha, ha! I am a fiend—a fiend! Satan owns my soul and Satan aids my plots! My schemes are bound to succeed! They cannot fail! I shall have revenge—sweet revenge on all my enemies! I will see them cringe at my feet! They shall grovel in the dust and howl for mercy, but mercy they shall not find!"

The man's eyes were gleaming redly and his face was working in a terrible manner. Old True gazed at him in a sort of horrible fascination, and of a sudden a thought flashed over him:

"Ther critter's mad!" was his mental exclamation.

CHAPTER XVIII.

RED HAND'S THREAT.

"YAS, he's mad as a March hare!" thought the veteran. "I kin see it in his eyes. But who in thunder an' guns is he? I swan ter man, that's ther face of both Cap'n Red Han' an' Sleek Saul—yas, it be! All ther same, I kneow both of them critters is dead."

That the man was mad did not explain his wonderful resemblance to the dead. The mystery was too great for Old True to solve.

Suddenly the outlaw turned and walked to the door, swinging the portal open, as if to catch a breath of fresh air. The captive's position only enabled him to see out upon a rocky wall that ran past one end of the cabin. It was not absolutely dark without; but the shadows were dense.

After standing for some moments in the open doorway, the chief of the bandits turned back into the hut. With some relief, the Trusty saw the strange man seemed much calmer, all traces of passion having vanished from his face.

But then with his features as impressive as if chiseled from a block of ice, the resemblance to the face of Sleek Saul was all the more startling.

"Great gosh all hemlock!" gasped Old True. "I'm darned ef this hain't 'tarnal sing'ler! It's queer, by smoke!"

The chief paused in front of his captive, the light of the smoking lamp falling fairly on his face.

"You still doubt me," he said, with a cold sneer. "I can see it on your countenance. Poor fool! All my excitement is gone. A moment ago I was Rebal Raguel, a man of passion. It was known far and wide he had a fearful temper. His men dreaded any outburst of passion on the part of their chief. Saul Raguel was a man with iron nerves. He never allowed himself to become excited, no matter what might occur. I am now governed by that portion of the soul which Saul Raguel possessed, for I am first one and then the other of the dead brothers. Because I do not rave and fume is no sign I do not hate you as fiercely as I did a moment ago. Now I have myself well in hand—now I am Sleek Saul!"

He spoke in a manner that told he fully believed his own words, and, had such a thing been probable, Old True might have thought one of the brothers had escaped death and stood before him. But the utter impossibility of such a thing seemed plainly apparent to him.

Cold and impassive, the man before him indeed seemed like Sleek Saul the gambler.

"Tain't him," was the old man's comment; "but all ther same, I'd like ter know who in thunder an' guns it is. Ef it hain't some 'scaped loonertick, I don't kneow my head frum a hole in the graound!"

"I can read your thoughts," was the startling assertion of the outlaw chief. "You do not believe I am what I claim. Well, I do not wonder. All the same, you shall be made to believe before this part of the country sees the last of Captain Red Hand. I have come to scourge my enemies, and you are chief among them. You shall suffer as you never suffered before!"

"What yeou goin' ter do with me?"

"Nothing at present. My time to strike direct at you has not come."

"Then why in thunder did yeou have me brought heur?"

"I had a reason. I wish Zeb Horn to know I tell the truth when I claim that his wife is in my possession. The old fool can never see her again till he comes down liberally with the cash."

"Ef you are whut yeou claim, w'at good is cash ter yeou?"

"I do not care for money, but my followers do. Besides that, it is a part of my plan of revenge to strip Zeb Horn of all he possesses. As Captain Red Hand, the First, I tried to secure his mine, but was defeated. I also admired his daughter, and I still have a liking for her. That is why I sought to possess her this last time. I will yet get her in my power."

"God forbid!"

"God! Ha! ha! ha! He will not thwart my plans! I have nothing to do with Him, for I belong to Satan!"

"I believe it!"

"Ab-a! Then you are beginning to believe? It is well! I *knew* you would."

"Don't yeou go fer ter think I believe yeour yarn about comin' back from ther dead, even though it's mighty plain yeou do b'long ter Satan."

Red Hand walked to the door and back.

"It is all right," he said slowly. "I shall not try to compel belief. Your doubts will vanish in the end. I am going to let you see Betsey Horn."

Producing a silver whistle, he blew a shrill blast, and, in a brief space of time, one of the outlaws appeared before him.

"Bring the old woman," was the curt order of the chief.

The man saluted and withdrew.

"Now, look here," and the strange leader of the outlaws turned to Old True. "I want you to tell Zeb Horn all you saw and heard. Tell him whatever the woman may tell you. I want him to know how completely I hold the power to crush him."

Old True's heart gave a great leap. Was it possible the chief meant to let him go free again? But second thought led him to believe it all a trick to work upon his feelings. Red Hand would lead him to believe he was to be released, but nothing of the kind would occur.

Once more it seemed as if the glowing eyes of the outlaw read the Trusty's thoughts.

"I am not fooling you," declared the mysterious Marauder. "You shall be set free before two more hours have passed. It will not be an act of friendship or compassion on my part, but I wish you to act as my agent."

Old True was wondering at the words, when two men came in, escorting Betsey Horn. He looked sharply at the rancher's wife, wondering if she was still deranged. Mrs. Horn's first words gave him relief.

"What do you mean ter do with me now?" she demanded, facing the outlaw chief and not appearing to see Trusty.

"I have had you brought here to see a friend," was the captain's reply.

"A frien'? I hev none hyer!"

"Look around and see."

She did so, and her eyes fell on Old True. She gave a great cry, starting toward him.

"Truman, Truman!"

The old man gritted his teeth with rage as he saw her hands were bound behind her.

"It's me," was his reply.

"An' you—you be a captive, like me?"

"Yas, Mis' Horn."

"Oh, these evils—these fiends!"

"They've got me dead ter rights," he confessed.

Captain Red Hand stepped forward.

"I am going to leave you two together for a time," he said. "One is bound to the wall and the hands of the other are fastened behind her, so I fancy you will be all right. However, I shall be just outside the door all the while, and I am apt to appear at a most unexpected moment. Mrs. Horn, if you have any message to send to your husband, you can send it by this person, for he is to be set at liberty within two hours."

She turned to him appealingly; she would have held out her hands had they been free.

"You are going ter set him free, ye say? W'y don't ye set me free, too? I'm dyin' ter see my ole man an' my gals once more—dyin', dyin'! Ef you hev er heart—ef you be er man, you will let me go! W'at hev I ever done ter you, a pore ole woman, thet ye sh'u'd keep me hyer a prisoner? I hain't never harmed ye in no way, fer I w'u'dn't harm anythin' thet God ever made! Oh, do let me go! Ef ye don't, I'll die!"

"I will take the chances of your dying," came coldly from the chief. "You will pull through all right, I reckon; but if you die, I shall not moan. It will only make it necessary for me to devise another method of wringing boodle from old Zeb Horn."

"Don't go!" she almost screamed, as he was turning away. "Ef you be a man—ef you hev a heart—"

"I am *not* a man!" he grimly declared; "and I have no heart! You are wasting your breath, old woman."

"Don't yeou beg of that critter," advised Old True. "Yeou might as well talk ter a rock."

A smile of satisfaction curled the outlaw's cold lips, and then he passed from the hut, closing and barring the door behind him.

Thus the helpless man and woman were left together in the old hut. For some moments neither spoke. True saw Mrs. Horn was in her right mind once more, but how long would she retain her reason and remain in the power of the outlaws? That was the question.

"Wa-al, Mis' Horn," said True, slowly, "I'm 'tarnal glad ter see yeou are alive."

She started, and then came swiftly to his side.

"My children—w'at o' them?" she asked.

"They are all right," was his assurance.

"Kate—my Leetle Kit—"

"Is safe at ther Red Spur. Sylva is also thar."

She lifted her eyes, crying:

"Oh, God, I thank ye fer this!"

"Yas, they're all right," continued the Trusty.

"An' Zeb is all right, only he is all tore aout about you."

"Whar is he?"

"With ther party of searchers."

"Anywhar nigh?"

"Wa-al, not so very fur. I wur with 'em this mornin', an' I hav tromped heur all ther way afoot."

A look of joy overspread the poor woman's face.

"Then he may find me!" she cried—"he may find me!"

"Mebbe so. Anyhaow, yeou kin jest bet we shell do aour level best ter git yeou free. We have got craowd enough ter wipe aout these aoutlaws, an' we'd do it ef we had a chainece ter git at 'em."

"I must get away soon, ur I shell go mad! It is a dark an' horrid place whar they keep me, an' I kin hear ther rats go skurryin' over ther floor. It makes me feel powerful wild sometimes!"

"Ther whelps of sin!" gritted Old True. "They oughter be strung by ther neck ev'ry belasted aoutlaw! That's whut they're goin' ter git purty darned soon!"

He wondered that the woman was in her right mind then. It did, indeed, seem strange, after all she had passed through. But she was not made of common stuff.

"Ef yeou c'u'd only git yeour han's free neow," he whispered, a sudden thought coming to him. "Then yeou c'u'd set me free, I'd fight fer yeou ter ther last gasp. Nuthin' but death sh'u'd ever daown me!"

She slowly shook her head.

"It hain't no use," was her reply. "They made my han's powerful tight afore they let me come hyer. Ef I knowed my life wuz 'pendin' on it, I c'u'dn't git clear."

"Mebbe it's better so," muttered True. "I s'pose I'd only fight tell I wur killed, that's all. I may be able ter lead ther boys ter this place."

"I trust ye will. Tell Zeb I am hyer, though."

I am 'most dead. Tell him I'm 'pendin' on him ter save me. I want ter see my children afore I die—I want ter hole my leetle gals in my arms once more!"

Her voice broke and tears ran down her cheeks, as she went on:

"They be good gals, them two o' mine. Thar's Kate, she hain't stuck up ner northin' sence she got so much eddycashun—no she hain't! She don't fergit her ole mommy, even though I'm an ole ignerent critter. She 'members me an' 'members I'm her own mommy thet loves her better'n I do myself. Sylva's er good gal, too, but she hain't jest like one's own flesh an' blood child. I didn't know but she'd be 'shamed o' me arter she an' Kate went off ter school, but it never made no diff'ence in either o' 'em. They jest hugged me an' kissed me an' luffed an' cried w'en they got back ter me. Oh, God hes bin good ter guv me sech gals! an' it don't seem possible he means ter take me frum 'em now. Ef I kin only hev er few more y'ars with 'em thet's all I'll ax—jest a few!"

Old True was deeply touched by the mother's words, and he spoke with deep feeling.

"Yeou know ther Good Book says God sees ther sparrers fall, Mi' Horn. Ef he sees sech leetle things, he surely has eyes fer us human critters when we are in need. Keep up yeour faith in Him, an' I cal'late it'll all come aout right in ther end."

"Thankee, Truman! I won't fergit yer words, though it duz almost seem as if God hed clean fergot me. I'll wait an' trust in Him."

"Hark!"

There were footsteps at the door.

"They're comin' back, Betsey. Don't fergit that we'll do all we kin fer yeou."

The door swung open and three outlaws entered, Captain Red Hand being one of them.

"Time is up," declared the chief. "I suppose you have said all you wish. Men, take the woman away."

Then Betsey was led from the hut.

Once more the mysterious chief of the mountain bandits was left with his captive. He stood before Old True, his hands resting on his hips.

"Well, you have seen her," he said. "Now you know she is really my captive. Zeb Horn cannot doubt that when you tell him what you have seen."

Old True did not speak. Seeing this, Captain Red Hand went on:

"I want you to tell Zeb Horn I will give him till to-morrow night to turn his back to these mountains. It will be useless for him to attempt to discover this retreat in that brief space of time."

"Whut ef he refuses ter go?"

"Then I will send him his wife, was the astonishing reply.

"Yeou don't mean it?" gasped the Trusty.

"I do."

"I cal'late he'll stay then."

"Not when he hears *how* I will send her."

"Ah!"

"Exactly. I shall send her in pieces."

"Yeou—yeou—"

"There, there!" warned the outlaw. "Keep your pet names for some one else, Truman. I do not wish to hear them."

"But I'm darned ef yeou don't desearve 'em!"

"We will not discuss that. If Zeb Horn does not turn his back on this part of the country by to-morrow night, I shall cut off Mrs. Horn's thumbs and send them to him. Twenty-four hours later I will send him her left hand. Her right shall follow, and if he still persists in remaining, I will have her head cut off and sent to him."

The outlaw spoke calmly and deliberately, but his eyes glowed with the fire of madness.

CHAPTER XIX.

TREACHERY.

OLD True Blue said nothing more, for he had no desire to further arouse the man in whose power he was, and he fancied he had said quite enough. He had shown Captain Red Hand he did not fear him, even though his helpless captive. If the mysterious outlaw saw fit, through some strange whim, to set him free, he would gladly accept his liberty, and thank his lucky stars for his good fortune.

The chief seemed in no particular hurry about releasing his prisoner, for he folded his arms and once more stood gazing down at the Trusty. For several minutes he stood thus, neither of the men uttering a word. Finally, the outlaw leader nodded his head slightly, saying:

"Yes, yes; that is right. My revenge will be all the more complete. I will round them all up together, and show them the power of the Red Hand."

Then he produced the silver whistle once more and blew a blast upon it. In answer to the signal, two outlaws entered the hut, one of them being Spikey Joe.

"Take this man to the spot where he was captured, and set him free," commanded the chief. Then speaking to True: "Do not forget to deliver my message to Zeb Horn."

The old man made no reply, and, without an-

other word, the chief of the outlaws left the hut.

"Come now, critter!" cried Spikey Joe, roughly. "We've got ter muffle up yer eyes. We don't want ye peekin' round ter see how ter git in hyer."

Once more the bandage was placed over Old True's eyes. He made no resistance, for he knew it would be folly to do so.

When the old man was securely blindfolded, he was released from the wall and ordered to march. He did not hesitate about obeying, but even then he fancied it might be a trick of the outlaws to cause him still further torture.

But it was not. Red Hand was a man of strange words and acts, and his own men did not understand him. They stood in great awe of him, the flash of his piercing eyes being enough to cause the boldest to quail.

After leaving the old hut, Truman found himself conducted along the same rough road he had traveled when he was brought to the retreat. The veteran had tramped the Wild West enough to be able to tell a road by its feeling beneath his feet, and so he knew he was not being taken from the outlaws' stronghold by another course than the one he traveled when brought there.

Spikey Joe seemed unusually rough and brutal in his acts and words, quite in contrast to his manner of a short time before.

Old True bore it all in silence as long as he could, then he burst out:

"Belast yeour measly hide, Spikey Joe! thar's er good rope waitin' fer yeour neck!"

Strange to say, Spikey made no retort, and from that time he treated the old man more respectfully.

Once more they came out into the hot glare of the sun, and climbed upward toward the point where Old True was made a captive.

Up, up they went, the climb being difficult and tiresome.

Suddenly Spikey Joe halted with a low exclamation, and his companion demanded to know the matter.

"I 'low I saw a human critter down thar in ther cut," he replied.

"Down whar?"

"Right down thar by them rocks."

"Whar is he now?"

"Went ahind ther rocks. He wuz goin' down ther cut."

"Bosh, Joe! Ye never saw no one!"

"Wal, I jest did!"

For some minutes the two men watched the ravine below, but neither caught a glimpse of a human being.

"Don't b'lieve ye saw a derved thing," grunted Spikey's companion.

"I tell ye I did!"

"Wal, whar's ther critter now?"

"Hanged ef I know! Must be ahind ther rocks."

"Bosh!"

"Look hyer, Pike Madden, do you mean ter call me a liar?"

"Naw."

"Then w'at do ye mean?"

"I 'lows yer eyes fooled ye."

"Wal, I don't 'low nuthin' of ther sort. I know I saw a human critter down thar."

"Wal, I'm goin' down an' see."

"All right. Go ahead, an' I'll wait hyer."

Pike Madden swung himself down the rocks, while Spikey Joe and Old True Blue reclined on the ground. Barely was Madden out of hearing before Joe said:

"Thar hain't er derved soul down thar, Truman."

Old True did not reply.

"I wanted ter git rid of him," added Spikey Joe.

Old True wondered why the traitor-cowboy wished to get rid of his comrade, but he refrained from asking any questions.

"I want ter speak with yer all erlone," continued Joe. "Thet is why I got thet critter ter go off down thar. Suthin' you said set me ter thinkin' of w'at I dreamt last night."

The captive wondered what the fellow was coming at.

"You said thar wuz a rope waitin' fer me, an' thet made me 'member I dreamt of bein' hanged. I thort I wuz lynched."

"That's jest a warnin'," asserted Trusty.

"I 'lowed it wuz. I thort I wuz swung up ter ther limb of a tree an' I wuz choking—oh, God!—choking! I kin never fergit how it felt! I c'u'dn't breathe an' I tried ter tear ther rope from my neck, but it wuzn't nary bit of use. I wuz dyin'! Oh, I w'u'dn't go through thet erg'in fer hafe ther worl'!"

Old True granted.

"Humph! Yeou'll have ter go threw it in 'arnest 'fore long."

"Thet's w'at I'm 'feared of," confessed the outlaw. "Ef it wuzn't too late, I'd turn honest again; but it's too late fer thet. Thar hain't no show fer me now."

"I hain't so sure of that."

"Oh, I know it! Ef I wuz ter turn honest, ther chief never'd rest tell he hed wiped me out."

"You'd want ter get aout of this part of ther kentry."

"I hev thort of that, but I reckon I c'u'dn't

git erway afore he'd finish me. Ef I only thort it'd be ary bit of good, I'd manage ter set Betsey Horn free—"

Old True nearly sprung to his feet.

"Whut?" he almost shouted.

"Sh!" hissed Spikey Joe. "Madden may hear ye. Ef he hears, he may s'pect suthin'."

"Yeou don't mean that yeou'd really set Betsey Horn free, do ye?" eagerly asked Old True.

"Wal, I w'u'd ef I thort it'd help me in ary way."

"*Help ye!* W'y, darn it, man! ef yeou set her free, I'll stan' by ye ter ther last gasp! Not thet I'll have ary bit more love fer ye, but I'll jest do it ter make ther matter squar'. More than that, Zeb Horn 'll stan' by ye."

"Shore?"

"Yas. But yeou are foolin'; yeou c'u'dn't set Betsey free ef yeou wanted ter."

"I c'u'd."

"Haow?"

"I am ter stan' guard over her ther las' part of ter-night."

"Wal?"

"Wal, thar's a way ter git aout of ther little cave 'thout goin' through ther camp a tall. Never'd a derved soul be ther wiser tell mornin'."

The Trusty's heart was beating high with excitement. Could he induce the treacherous cowboy to play the traitor with his outlaw master? If so, the result might be worth any compromise.

"Look heur, Spikey Joe," said the old man, speaking swiftly, "ef yeou want ter 'scape ther rope, this is your chance. Ef yeou set Betsey Horn free an' bring her ter aour camp, ev'ry blamed man'll fight fer yeou, no matter whut yeou have done in ther past. Red Han' means ter murder ther woman, an' yeou will be savin' her life. Zeb Horn will understan' that, an' yeou won't go 'thout yeour reward."

Spikey seemed to hesitate.

"You hain't tryin' ter fool me, be you, ole man?" he asked.

"Nary bit. It's ther pure white artikill I am givin' yeou. This is ther chauce of yeour life, if yeou want ter 'scape ther halter."

"An' I do."

"Then do as I have said."

"I don't durst do it."

True's heart sunk.

"Yeou'll be er thunderin' fool ef yeou don't!" he spluttered.

"Ef I only knowed I c'u'd 'scape ther Red Han', w'y then I'd do it!"

"An' I tell yeou I'll help ye. Zeb Horn'll be reddy ter fergit ther past, an' he'll help ye, too."

"Ef I c'u'd only git East."

"We'll help ye git East."

"Honest?"

"Yas."

"I've got a pore old mother back thar somewhere."

"Ef yeou want ter see her, this is yer chance. Promise ter set Betsey Horn free ter-night, an' we'll be lookin' fer yeou. Will yeou—"

"Sh! Madden is comin' back! Not ernother word!"

Spikey's companion came climbing up over the rocks, disgust written on his face.

"You're a sharp-eyed critter, you be!" he sneered. "You make me tired, you do! You oughter hev some spectacles, you had!"

"W'at's gnawin' of ye?" growled Joe.

"Heap plenty. You didn't see nary derved soul down thar."

"Wal, I did!"

"Wal, you *didn't*!"

"Think I can't see straight?"

"I reckon."

"I know I saw somebody. Ef you didn't find 'em I hain't ter blame."

"Oh, go git spectacles!" sneered Pike Madden, once more.

At this Spikey Joe bristled up.

"I kin putt your eyes in mournin' in about two jiffs," he asserted, angrily.

Madden was not much of a fighter, and he instantly "took water."

"Oh, w'at's ther use of gittin' mad at a leetle foolin', Joe?" he demanded.

"Wal, this foolin' hes bin kerried fur enough," retorted Joe. "I don't want ter hear any more out of your head, so you shet!"

And Madden "shet."

Once more the march was taken up, and before long they were approaching the spot where Old True Blue was taken captive. Madden led the way, and Spikey guided the blind man's steps. In doing so, he found an opportunity to whisper a word in the captive's ear:

"Done!"

That was all he said, but the Trusty understood it as an agreement to release the woman. His heart gave a great leap of satisfaction.

"Hooray!" was his mental shout. "We'll fool the Red Han' ur bu'st!"

When the spot where Old True was captured was reached the three halted.

"Hyar we are goin' ter set ye free," announced Spikey, removing the blindfold. "We hain't goin' ter guv ye no chance ter turn ther tables on us, so ye won't git yer weppins. Them are confisterated, but ye may think yerself

"mighty lucky ter git off as easy as ye be. Keep him kivered, Pike, while I cuts him loose."

Madden obeyed the order, and Spikey severed the cords which had held the old fellow's hands behind him.

"Thar ye be!" bowed Joe. "Now I advises you ter git fer your pard. Ef you tries ter foller us, we has orders ter salt ye fer keeps. Eh, Pike?"

"You bet!"

"An' we'll do it. Eh, Pike?"

"You bet!"

"So good-day ter ye, pard—good-day."

Bowing mockingly, the two outlaws backed away and soon disappeared behind some rocks, leaving Old True alone.

"Wa-al," he soliloquized, as he gazed around, "heur I be, right side up with care. I never s'pected ter git inter sech a scrape an' git aout with a whole skin—no, I never!"

The sun was going down and night was not far away. He saw this, and at once decided to lose no time in getting back to his friends. He had no thought of attempting to follow the outlaws who had been his escorts, for he knew well enough they were watching his every movement.

"They'll foller me a piece, I cal'late," he muttered. "Waal, let 'em foller."

He started out, not even casting a look over his shoulder. His one object seemed to be to get out of Satan's Section as soon as possible, and he felt certain he was not followed far.

The sun slipped down from sight and darkness came on. By the light of the moon and stars, Old True trudged steadily on. He did not wish to meet a ravenous wild animal of any sort, for he was wholly unarmed, and he was fortunate in avoiding an encounter of any kind.

It was not far from midnight when he reached the camp. He found the greater portion of the men sleeping, although some were awake and watching for his return, Zeb Horn being among the number. The whole camp was aroused when he appeared.

It did not take Old True long to tell his story, and it created no little surprise and excitement. The greatest wonder of all was the compact made with Spikey Joe.

"Do ye think ther critter will keep his word?" asked Zeb, excitedly.

"Ter be course he won't!" disgustedly put in Wobbly Walt. "Ther onery skunk never hed a thort of keepin' it! Dern him! ther rope is too good fer sech as he!"

And the cowboy was not alone in the belief. "Thar is a chaine he will stick ter his word," declared Old True deliberately.

"I'm 'feared it's er mighty slim chance," retorted Zeb shaking his head, mournfully. "We'll hev ter leave hyer, ur thet devil will be sendin' Betsey's thumb ter us."

"Oh, we have till to-morrer night. Thet guvs us plenty of time ter see ef Spikey Joe will keep his word."

"All the time you spend in waitin' fer thet whelp will be wasted," nodded Wobbly Walt. "You jest mark thet down, an' see ef I hain't right."

For at least two hours the men discussed the situation; but at length they once more lay down to sleep. Zeb Horn had not closed his eyes for many hours, and exhausted nature forced him to do so. Tired by his tramp, Old True was only too glad to rest.

Wobbly Walt was left on guard.

For some reason, the Trusty found it almost impossible to get asleep, even though he was tired and needed the refreshment of slumber. He lay for a long time watching the slowly moving guard, and once or twice he fancied Walt glanced covertly in his direction. Somehow, his suspicion that all was not right was aroused, and, closing his eyes, he feigned slumber.

The guard moved cautiously about, now and then peering at the sleeping men. Through his his eyelids Old True watched the unsteady figure, and all the time he wondered if Walt could be thinking of anything that was not exactly honest.

As the moments passed the old man became more and more certain everything was not right.

"Darned ef I don't b'lieve he's up ter some shennagan!" he thought.

The wobbly cowboy moved about till he seemed to feel certain all the men were asleep, then he edged away into the darkness. Softly arising to his feet, Old True Blue extracted a couple of revolvers from the holsters of a saddle near at hand, and then he moved slowly around the camp till he was able to follow the guard.

Walt had disappeared, but it happened that there was but one course for him to follow, and True was after him, creeping cautiously along, his eyes flashing here and there in search of the shaky figure.

It began to seem as if Walt had given his trailer the slip, and Old True was about to express his disgust, when he caught sight of a cautiously moving form. In an instant he was after it. The starlight was enough to enable him to follow successfully. For at least half a mile Old True trailed the cowboy.

"Ef he hain't goin' ter meet some other crit-

ter I don't know beans when ther bag's open!" thought the old man.

He was right.

At length, the cowboy gave a low whistle.

"Ah-al!" muttered the trailer. "He's signalin' ter ther t'other one."

The signal was not answered, so Wobbly Walt repeated it, a little louder than at first. That time it was answered, and, of a sudden, the cowboy disappeared.

"Gosh all hemlock!" gasped Old True. "Whar hes he gone ter? I wonder ef I have lost him? Holy smoke! Ef I have, I'll go kick myself silly!"

With additional caution he moved forward, for he knew not but he might run into a trap. One of the revolvers he held in his hand, the other he thrust into his belt.

When he came near the spot where he had last seen Wobbly Walt, the soft hum of voices came to his ears, telling him two men in conversation were not far away.

"Wonder whar they kin be?" he thought.

Suddenly he saw a gully-like fissure at his very feet, and at the bottom were two men. One of them was the cowboy, and the other—

"Darned ef I don't b'lieve I know him!" thought the trailer.

In a moment he heard the man speak, and then he was certain he knew him.

It was the treacherous villain, Spotted Dan!

CHAPTER XX.

OLD TRUE'S BATTLE AGAINST ODDS.

THE discovery did not prove a great surprise to Old True Blue, for he had fancied something was wrong in camp. More than once he had imagined some of the men might be traitors, but he had discovered nothing suspicious. Now he had learned he was right and had also spotted the traitor.

Crouching behind some bushes on the verge of the ravine, he strained his ears to hear what the men were saying. To his intense satisfaction, he was able to distinguish the words. Wobbly Walt was speaking:

"Ther very ole devil is ter pay!" he declared.

"Spikey Joe is a traitor!"

"W'at?" cried Spotted Dan in amazement.

"Thet's jest w'at!"

"How d'ye know?"

Then Walt related all that Old True Blue had told the camp, to which Spotted Dan listened in amazement.

"Holy Moses!" cried the pock-marked outlaw. "Thet'll set ther very ole devil ter pay!"

"You bet!"

"W'at's goin' ter be did?"

"You must git word ter ther chief."

"But, I can't do it in time now, fer ther night is purty nigh gone. Ef Spikey meant ter kerry out this yere business, he's worked ther game afore this."

"Wal, ther chief must know it ter once."

"He'll know it afore I kin git thar ther best I kin do. All I kin see fer it is ter try ter stop Spikey on ther road hyer."

"Ef you only knowed how he'd come."

"But I don't."

"Durn his hide!"

"Double dern his hide!"

"Ther chief'll wipe him out fer this."

"Bet yer boots!"

"Ef you git a wipe at him, fix ther critter fer keeps."

"I'll do it. How is things goin' in camp?"

"O. K."

"Nobody draps ter ye?"

"Nary soul, 'less it's Ole True Blue. I'm skeerd of thet ole varmint, fer he's sharper'n blazes."

"He's a mighty bother. I wish we hed him hyer. Ef we did—"

"Waal, whut'd yeou do?"

With a revolver in either hand, the old man slid gracefully down the bank and confronted the astonished ruffians!

"Ef yeou only hed me heur, w'at in thunder'd yeou do ter me?" he inquired. "Jest talk right aout an' give it ter me straight."

Wobbly Walt and Spotted Dan started back, their hands falling on their weapons.

"Pull yer pops, boys, an' I'll give yeou a through ticket ter ther Shinin' Shore," chuckled the daring old man, intensely enjoying the consternation of the rascals. "Yeou both ought ter know I allus hits w'en I shoots."

They were well aware of that fact.

"Kinder took yeou by s'prise, didn't I, boys?" laughed the Trusty. "Waal, that's er way I have. I'm 'most alwus raound w'en they hain't lookin' fer me. Neow, hain't yeou two purty birds! Waal, yeou jest be. Hands up, both of ye!"

Wobbly Walt reluctantly obeyed; but Spotted Dan hesitated.

"Hands up!" again ordered Old True, speaking sharply. "Be lively abaout it, ur I'll let ther evenin' breeze blow through a ventilation in yeour body, ye measly lizard!"

Spotted Dan saw the old man meant to shoot if he was not obeyed, so he raised his hands, uttering a savage snarl.

"Good!" nodded the veteran. "Thet's w'at

pleases yer Uncle True. Oh, hain't this fun! hain't it a regular jubulum! Ho! ho! ho! he! he! he!"

He burst into a whimsical laugh, seeming immensely delighted by what had occurred.

"Ther old man is a great critter ter be snoopin' araound," he chuckled. "An' he usually tumbles ter things. Won't ther boys have some fun w'en they see yeou two birds. Wa-al, yeou bet yer socks! Ho! ha! he! haw!"

Spotted Dan fancied he saw the chance to take the old fellow off his guard, and, uttering a yell, he leaped for Old True. The other traitor also made a spring at the same time.

The old man had time to fire a single shot, then both the desperadoes were on him.

"Down him!" snarled Spotted Dan. "He's shot me, but I'm goin' ter see him wiped out before I croak. Guv him yer knife, Walt!"

Old True Blue knew his revolvers would be of little service in the hand-to-hand encounter that was to follow, and so he dropped them, feeling for his knife. To his dismay it was not in its usual place, and then he remembered his weapons had been taken by the outlaws.

"Gosh all hemlock!" he spluttered.

His situation would have appalled a less daring man. Single-handed and unarmed, he was to fight for his life against two armed foes!

"Belast my eyes ef I don't show ther critters ther kind of stuff Daown-East Yankees are made of!" he gritted.

With a telling blow he sent Wobbly Walt reeling to the ground, then turned to face Spotted Dan.

"Cuss ye!" howled the pock-marked ruffian. "You hev salted me, but I'm goin' ter guv ye ther length of this!"

The starlight glinted on a long, shining blade in the man's hand.

"Come on!" cried Old True, boldly facing the wretch. "I'll show yeou ther kind of stuff they make shingles of, ur I'm a gosh darned hayseed! Wade right in, Spotted Dan, an' ef I don't kick a lung aout of yeou, I'm a liar by ther clock!"

Dan waited for no second invitation. Making a rush, he tried to stab Old True, but the veteran succeeded in dodging the stroke. Then the old man's hard fist struck the rascal on the jaw, the smack sounding almost as loud as the report of a pistol.

Spotted Dan went down as if struck by a cannon-ball.

By this time Wobbly Walt was on his feet, and Old True barely turned soon enough to meet the rush of the traitorous cowboy. Walt was also brandishing a knife.

"I'll cut yer heart out!" he howled.

"Mebbe so; mebbe not."

As Walt struck at his breast, the veteran's fingers closed on the fellow's wrist, and the stroke was arrested.

Old True actually laughed!

"This cuttin' business hain't provin' no great success so far," he observed, as he proceeded to give the cowboy a terrific punching. "Somehaow it don't pan aout as well as it might, not by a big heap. I never *did* like ter be chopped. Haow do you like this fer fun? I'll bet a boss yeou are seein' a heap of stars an' comets an' sich brilliant things."

The cowboy yelled and struggled, but True did not allow him to break away till he saw Spotted Dan slowly getting on his feet. Then, striking Walt a staggering blow between the eyes, he released his wrist, at the same time kicking him in the stomach. The kick doubled Walt up like a jack-knife, and left him gasping for breath.

Spotted Dan was desperate.

"You devill!" he grated. "Will nuthin' kill ye? Ef I c'u'd only git one dig at ye!"

Old True was fortunate enough to catch Dan's wrist, as he had Walt's, and for a moment the men glared into each other's eyes.

"How I hate ye!" came hoarsely from Spotted Dan's lips. "I reckon thet shot you fired hes done fer me, but I mean ter fix you if I kin."

"I never hed no grudge ag'in' yeou," returned Old True; "but I do jest natterally deespise sneaks an' traitors, an' lizards, an' them's whut yeou hev proved yerself ter be."

The pock-marked rascal made a desperate struggle to break Old True's grasp, and the two men fell to their knees, still keeping their holds. There they battled on, their panting breathing telling how fierce was the conflict. Spotted Dan firmly believed he had received a fatal wound, and he was only fighting for vengeance. That made him a more formidable enemy than he would otherwise have been.

"Walt, Walt!" he called. "Now is your time ter guv this yere critter ther knife! Brace up, an' let him have!"

But, fortunately for Truman Ballou, the shaky cowboy was still gasping for breath, having dropped his knife when he received the terrific kick in the stomach. Hearing Dan's call, he felt around on the ground for his knife, but did not immediately find it.

Old True fully understood in how great danger he was, but he could do no more than his strength and skill permitted. Every moment he expected to feel the knife of the treacherous

cowboy in his back. Giving Spotted Dan a fierce push, he succeeded in shoving the fellow over backward. At the same time he leaped to his feet.

Wobbly Walt had just found his knife, but he hesitated about attacking the savage old fighter.

"Come on, critter?" cried the Trusty, scornfully. "Are yeou afraid of an unarmed man w'en yeou have a knife?"

"You're a devil!" hissed Walt.

Spotted Dan was getting on his feet, and True saw he must dispose of one of the men, unless he wanted them both upon him at once. He immediated made a charge for Wobbly Walt, and the cowboy stood his ground.

Then the struggle was renewed with greater fierceness than ever.

Spotted Dan believed he saw his opportunity. Rushing forward, he struck a blow that he fancied would end the conflict. At that very moment, with a surge of his body, Old True Blue swung Wobbly Walt round toward the pock-marked traitor.

Dan's knife was buried to the hilt in the back of the other cowboy!

With a hollow groan, Walt sunk to the ground.

Spotted Dan was thunderstruck by the result of his blow and stood like one dazed, staring down at his comrade in crime. Old True Blue was also amazed, but he cut little time to waste. With a leap, he planted his fist between the eyes of the pock-marked villain, and Spotted Dan went down with a thud, fairly knocked senseless.

"Wa-al, by gosh! I've done it!" half-laughed the Trusty, looking first at one and then at the other of the two men. "I have jest eternally wound up their worsted!"

Wobbly Walt lifted himself upon his elbow, gasping:

"Air—give me air! Oh!—I can't breathe! I am—dyin'—dyin'!"

"Yeou have got it fer good," said Old True, a trace of pity and regret in his voice.

With a great cry of agony and horror, the wretch fell back—dead!

The victor of the unequal conflict examined the wound of the pock-marked villain, and discovered it was in truth mortal.

"They fetched it onto themselves," said the old man slowly. "But I dunno but it's ther best thing that c'd happen. It saved their necks from ther rope."

CHAPTER XXI.

SPIKEY JOE KEEPS HIS WORD.

THE old man disarmed Spotted Dan and removed the weapons from Wobbly Walt's belt. Then he searched around on the ground till he found the revolvers he had dropped.

"This rigs me aout like a walkin' arsenal," he observed, with grim humor.

He decided to leave the fallen men where they lay and return to the camp, so he scrambled out of the ravine.

A short time later he entered the camp and found it in a state of excitement, for both he and Wobbly Walt had been missed. His return was greeted with eager questions.

"Ev'rythin' is all right," he replied. "Ef yeou folks want ter fine Wobbly Walt, jest foler daown this way fer abaout hafe-a-mile tell yeou come ter ther great split rock. Jest beyond thar is a ravine, daown in ther bottom of which yeou'll find Wobbly Walt an' Spotted Dan."

"Spotted Dan?"

"Yas."

"The dickens!"

"Ruther say ther devil, fer that's abaout his size. All the saime, he has got his larse eternal dost, I cal'late."

On being questioned, Old True told his story. Great was the excitement it produced, and, a few minutes later, seven or eight of the party started for the ravine, where the uneven conflict had taken place.

Old True remained behind, declaring he did not wish to look on the two villains again.

Half an hour later, the men returned.

"Did yeou find 'em?" asked Old True Blue.

"Yep."

"Be both dead?"

"They be."

"Wur they so w'en yeou faound 'em?"

"Wal, Spotted Dan wuz breathin', but he didn't larst long," was the significant reply.

"Yeou didn't burry 'em?"

"Nope."

"Ther wolves—"

"Oh, thet's all right. We'll burry 'em in ther mornin'."

"But ther wolves?"

"Ther wolves won't tech 'em."

"Why not?"

"Cause they hain't tall ernough!" was the answer.

The old man understood the two treacherous villains had been suspended beyond the reach of the wolves. Death had not arrested the hands of the lynchers.

The excitement had thoroughly awakened Zeb

Horn, and there was little chance of his getting any more rest that night. Morning was not far away, but Old True resolved to get a short nap, if possible, for he realized how much he needed it. With Maverick Mat on guard, he knew his vigilance was no longer necessary, and he was soon fast asleep.

Morning came, but Spikey Joe did not appear.

"I don't b'lieve he'll come," said Zeb, in a disheartened manner. "He wuz foolin' ye, True."

"Not ef I know anythin' at all, by thutter!" was the emphatic reply. "I kin tell w'en a man's foolin', an' w'en he's in 'arnest, an' ef Spikey Joe wurn't in 'arnest, I dunno beans w'en ther bag's untied!"

Still Zeb did not brighten up.

"It hain't no use," he mumbled. "Luck is dead ag'in' me. It alwus wuz. W'en I got er leetle suthin', an' thort I wuz well fixed, suthin' kem up an' robbed me o' ev'ry dollar. Thet's w'at's goin' ter happen now. Not thet I keef fer money, as set ag'in' Betsey's safety, but I'm thinkin' o' ther gals."

"You need not worry about them," said Maverick Mat. "They will be cared for. It will make no difference to Hal or I about money, and we ought to be able to take care of our wives."

Zeb grasped the young cowboy's hand.

"I know—I know!" he acknowledged. "Thet makes me feel some better, but I hed planned so much thet'll never be kerried out."

"I am not sure of that. Even though you may be forced to pay a ransom for Mrs. Horn's return, it may not mean ruin."

"This devil—this second Red Hand, hessworn ter rob me o' ev'ry dollar."

"When Mrs. Horn is safe, we will turn out again and hunt him down."

Zeb shook his head.

"Easier sed then done, Mat."

Once more Old True expressed his belief in Spikey Joe's appearance, but he saw the others were doubtful about it, and so he remained silent after that.

A discussion among the men revealed a variety of ideas and plans, but finally it was decided to remain inactive, and hope that the traitor cowboy would appear. If he did not, the return of another night would compel them to leave the mountains in order to keep Red Hand from carrying out his threat. Some of the party did not believe the chief would do this, even though they continued the hunt; but Zeb Horn would not consent to place his wife in danger of mutilation.

Near midday the men were lying in the shade, smoking and sleeping, when, of a sudden, there was a whirring sound and an arrow struck point foremost in the ground in their very midst. They started up in alarm, grasping their weapons and glaring around, but no one was to be seen.

"Is it Injuns?" asked one.

"It can't be ole Geronimo hes got back ter these yere parts!"

"Thet's so."

"Tain't Injuns."

Old True Blue drew the arrow from the ground, and a bit of paper was seen wrapped tightly around the shaft.

"This is ther way Red Han' hes taken ter sendin' his messages nsowadays," observed the veteran, as he carefully removed the paper. "Thar's written writin' on it, by gosh! Heur, yeou, Mat, yeou'r eddicated. Jest yeou read this stuff, will yeou?"

Zeb Horn was greatly excited.

"Read it!" he cried—"read it, quick!"

Mat took the slip of paper, and read as follows:

"TO ZEB HORN:—Remember what I have sworn to do if you have not turned your back on these mountains by sunset. I always keep my word. I will surely send you the thumbs of the wife of your bosom. If you would save her, *git!*"

"CAPTAIN RED HAND."

For a moment after this was read there was a grim silence, then mutterings of rage broke from many lips. Zeb Horn turned pale though the coat of tan which covered his face.

"Thet devil!" he hoarsely whispered. "He'll shorely keep his word!"

Old True Blue did not try to reassure the shaken husband, for he likewise believed Captain Red Hand would keep his word. He had looked into the gleaming eyes of the outlaw chief, and he felt that a demon dwelt in the man's breast. Red Hand would hesitate at no act, however bloody and inhuman.

Zeb was so disturbed and excited that he was for leaving the camp at once and turning back toward the ranch; but Old True at once set himself against such a thing.

"If we do so, we may leave Spikey Joe to follow our trail, a thing which would not be easy in the darkness," agreed Maverick Mat, after he had listened to the Trusty's argument. "Truman is right. We should remain here till near sunset."

Many of the others also expressed a belief that such was the proper course to pursue. With the coming of night it would be cooler, and there-

fore they could travel much easier. Zeb yielded reluctantly.

The day slipped away, and in vain the party watched for the appearance of Joe. Old True Blue's courage ebbed as the afternoon passed.

"I tole ye!" exclaimed Zeb.

True only grunted.

"I knowed ther critter didn't mean it," said the rancher. "Sech pesky p'ison imps kin never be trusted."

"I'll 'gree with that," acknowledged the veteran; "but I kneow Spikey wur in dead 'arnest w'en he wur torkin', no matter whut he may hev decided on sence. I hain't very easy ter fool, ef I am an ole hayseed."

"I'm 'feared I'll never see Betsey no more!"

"Wa-al, yeou will."

"It don't look thet way now."

"Why?"

"I reckon Red Han' means ter git ther money then murder ther pore ole gal."

"Bosh!"

"Mebbe it is bosh, but I can't help thinkin' so."

"All ther more fool yeou!" was True's blunt retort. "Yeou kin make it so it'll be a squar' exchange with no shennannigans. Ef it comes ter that, which I hope it won't, jest yeou let yer Uncle Truman manage ther 'fair."

"I'll do it."

"Then it'll come aout purty nigh right. But I have something that troubles me, as well as yeou."

"W'at's thet?"

"It's ther disappearance of my boy—my Hal. I can't understan' whar he kin be."

"It is strange."

"Wa-al, it is. I feel that he's all right; but why sh'd he go orf in sech a way?"

"I dunno."

"Nor do I. It war a strange freak."

"Thet's so. You know he hed trouble with Cranston. You don't s'pose they hev met an' killed each other?"

"I don't cal'late so, though it may be," and Old True's face became clouded. "If Cranston hes killed my boy an' he still lives, I'll call him ter a count fer it, shore as thar's a sky over aour heads!"

"He hain't fell iater ther han's o' ther out-laws?"

"No. Captain Red Han's tork showed me that. He is all right so fur as they are consarned."

"I reckon he'll show up all right in ther eend."

"Waal, I hope so too. He's all I hev got, an' it'd kill me ter lose him neow!"

Nearly two hours before sunset the party began preparing to move, and less than an hour later the start was made. Old True seemed quite chagrined at the non-appearance of Spikey Joe.

"I still stick ter it that ther feller meant ter come," he declared. "It wur only 'cause he c'u'dn't that he didn't. Mebbe he tried ter an' they snooped onto him. Ef so—"

"Good-by, Joe!"

The Trusty nodded.

"Thet's abaout ther size of it."

In his head Truman was revolving a plan of action, but for a long time he did not speak of it, knowing it would not do to attempt putting it into action till he felt sure some of Red Hand's men were no longer watching the party. At length, he communicated his intention to Zeb.

"Look-ye-heur," he said, speaking in a low tone; "I'm goin' back thar an' try ter find ther hang-aout of them 'tarnal aoutlaws."

Zeb started.

"No, no!" he exclaimed.

"Yas, yas," nodded True. "I knew purty nigh whar ther nest is, an' mebbe I kin find it. Ef I sh'd, I c'd resky yer wife, Zeb."

But the rancher was filled with alarm.

"I'll never 'gree ter thet!" he cried.

"Waal, why not?"

"It'd be puttin' Betsey in sech danger."

"Oh, fush."

"It w'd, fer shore. Ef them pesky varmint knowed you had done it, they might cut her thumbs orf."

"I don't mean fer 'em ter kneow it, an' I don't 'low they'd cut her thumbs orf ef they did. Yeou have done yeour part an' turned frum ther maountains 'fore ther time sot. That makes thet all right. Yeou w'u'dn't be 'sponsible fer whut I done."

Still Zeb was fearful, and finally Old True came near losing his temper.

"Don't be a darned fool, pard!" he cried, keeping his voice in check so he would not attract the attention of all around. "Yeou know I hain't ther man ter do things thet'd git yeou inter ther mire more'n yeou be. I'm workin' ter git yeou aout. It don't make no diff'rance whether yeou want me ter stay behind ur not. I'm goin' ter, jest ther same."

The rancher knew Truman Ballou meant what he said when he spoke like that.

"Ef ary thing happens ter her, I'll hold you 'sponsible!" he declared.

True nodded.

"All right, Zeb. Ef I happen ter save her, yeou'll be sorry yeou didn't have more confer-

dence in yer old pard. I reckon we're watched neow; but I'll find a chaine ter drap aout, an' then I'll jest lay low till it is duskish like."

The old man found the opportunity he was looking for, and he remained in concealment while the others went on and disappeared. Darkness was coming on apace when he left his hiding-place and turned his horse's head back along the trail the party had made.

"I didn't let 'em kneow I still hed hopes of Spikey Joe," he muttered. "I knowed they'd think I wur a fool, so I kept it ter myself. I hain't no idee of goin' inter Satan's Section ter-night, but I'm goin' ter watch fer Spikey. Ef he don't come by nigh mornin', then I'll cave in that wur fooled by him. Ef he don't come, I'll do my level best ter overtake ther others."

He did not think it best to ride directly back along the trail, for he fancied some of the outlaws might lay in wait for any one who turned back.

"I'll kinder circle araound," he said. "I don't keer ter be knocked aout of the saddle by a shot from some critter hidin' in ambush. Fact is, I don't want ter chaw lead any old haow. It hain't ter my fancy."

At the first opportunity he left the trail and made a wide detour that brought him near the spot where the party had camped.

It was a typical Arizona night. The stars shone like bits of polished silver and the breezes from the mountain gorges were cool and invigorating with occasionally an icy breath that cut like a keen knife.

Old True's intention was to first visit the spot where the party had camped, even though he did not think it possible Spikey could be there so early in the night. This plan he followed out; then he rode onward toward Satan's Section.

About half a mile from the camping-place he came to a sudden halt, his horse rearing with a snort of terror. In a moment the man had a revolver in hand and was peering sharply here and there in the gloom.

What had startled his horse?

He asked himself the question, but was unable to answer it, for he saw nothing. Gently he touched the animal with the spur, but it gave another snort and shied to one side.

"Whut in thutteration kin be the matter with him?" thought the old man, and once more he peered into the shadows.

To the left a skulking form glided along and disappeared in the darkness amid the rocks. It was a wolf.

"Kin it be that wur the matter?" muttered True.

Again he tried to spur the horse onward, but once more the animal refused to advance.

A sudden breeze came up the gorge and something like a human groan sounded amid the branches of the trees near at hand. The noise attracted the Trusty's attention and he looked up.

"Great gosh all hemlock!"

Between him and the sky swung two human bodies! Then he understood what had frightened his horse.

"It's Wobbly Walt and Spotted Dan," he muttered. "The boys didn't take ther trouble ter burry 'em. All ther same, I dunno why ther vultures sh'd leave more then ther skeletons thar."

He dismounted and hitched his horse, then he went forward to the tree. Finding where the lariats were made fast, he lowered the corpses to the ground.

"They must have bin darned fools ter leave these good ropes heur," he observed. "They are wu'th confiscatin'. An' these critters hain't been tetcht a tall by ther vultures! By gosh! that's whut sticks me!"

It was a wonder never explained to the old man's satisfaction—something that had no precedent in his memory.

Removing the lariats, Old True set about seeking a place suitable for the burial of the bodies. He soon found a rift in the bank, close by, and thither he dragged them. Having deposited the bodies, he gathered an armful of brush. This he spread over the dead, then a few minutes' work with a long-bladed knife undermined the bank so it caved upon the bodies and effectually buried them from sight.

"Thar," muttered Old True, straightening up, with a sigh of relief, "that job is done. I can't b'ar ter see human critters go 'thout decent burrial, no matter whut they may hev bin. I'll feel a 'tarnal sight better than I w'd hed I left them swinging thar."

Appropriating the lassoes, he mounted his horse and rode back to the place where the party had camped.

"Got ter wash my han's," he said.

At the spring he washed the dirt from his hands and refreshed himself by a cool draught. Then he was ready to go on once more.

Midnight found him many miles from the region known as Satan's Section, but he did not attempt to penetrate further into the wilds. He had decided to turn back and had drawn rein when, of a sudden, he caught the sound of a distant hoof-beat.

"Kin it be?" he softly exclaimed, bending his head to listen. "Yas, by gosh!"

Looking around, he espied a place where the shadows lay dense and impenetrable. In a moment he had reined his horse toward the spot, and both were soon concealed.

Listening once more, he heard the sound again. Soon he was able to make out there were two horses, at least.

"Two critters!" he whispered, excitedly. "Great juniper! Whut ef it sh'd be? Holy smoke!"

He knew it was more than an even chance the horsemen would prove enemies, so he drew a revolver and waited.

Nearer, nearer, came the galloping horses. Plainly the riders were in a hurry.

"Ef thar hain't but two, I'll hail 'em anyhaow," came decidedly from Old True's lips.

"With ther 'vantage of a s'prise on my side, I kin look aout fer Truman."

Nearer, nearer—two horses and two riders appeared. The old man was about to call to them to halt, when they drew rein of their own accord.

"I reckon I hev lost my bearin's, mis'," said a voice that nearly caused Old True Blue to utter a shout of joy. "I'm sober honest w'en I say I dunno ary which way ter turn."

The speaker was Spikey Joe!

"Jest 'low me ter show yeou ther right way," called out the Trusty, as he rode from the shadows. "Be keerful, Spikey! Don't yeou go fer ter shoot me, Joseph!"

Spikey's companion was a woman, and Old True soon discovered the woman was Betsey Horn.

CHAPTER XXII.

HAL ON HAND.

WHEN Hurricane Hal rode from the Red Spur Ranch after meeting Frank Cranston there, he firmly believed he was leaving the place forever. There was a look of sadness—almost of despair on his handsome face and in his dark eyes.

"Good-by, Red Spur—good-by, my Little Kit!" he whispered softly. "The dream is over! The world lies wide before me, and to this spot I will never again return! She is free—I am free! The thought brings bitterness instead of joy."

He had gathered up all his little trinkets, the presents she had made him, and left them with a last farewell note to her. He believed they had never really understood each other, and he felt sure she would be rejoiced at her freedom.

There was one thing he did not leave behind—her picture! He could not give that up; he would keep it always, though he might seldom look at it. He knew it would give him pain whenever he did so, still he clung to it.

Once more he was attired in the garments of the cowboy. The suit in which he was to have been married to the choice of his heart he had stripped from his superb figure and thrown aside in disdain. How he hated it! Now he was a man once more! From head to heels he was a cowboy.

Gallop! to the crest of the swell in the rear of the ranch, he turned to look back upon it. Situated in the very heart of the most fertile section to be found within hundreds of miles of Silver City, the Red Spur was one of the most valuable ranches of Southern New Mexico.

"It seems like home," he murmured, something swelling in his throat and threatening to choke him. "It seems as if I were leaving the dearest spot on earth. Well, I must go—it must be! From this time on I am a wanderer!"

He lifted his hat for a moment and sat with uncovered head, unmindful of the blazing sun. In the distance he could see grazing herds, and everything seemed peaceful and happy. Was he less manly because there was a trace of moisture in his eyes?

Replacing his hat upon his head, he waved his hand in a farewell salute toward the ranch, then turned and rode onward once more.

Little he dreamed of the aching heart he left behind! Little he dreamed that at that moment Kate Horn was dissolved in tears, while she wildly called for him to come back to her, even though she knew he could not hear her.

"I will try to aid Zeb Horn in recovering his wife," decided Hal. "When Mrs. Horn is safe I will disappear. Nobody shall know whither I go. I will simply leave a message for my father, telling him not to wonder at my vanishing."

And so he rode on until nightfall, only pausing once to allow his horse to drink and to quench his own thirst. A part of the night was passed in slumber, and a part of it found him in the saddle with his face still set toward the Gila Mountains. He knew the lay of the land, and he could travel even better in the night than during the heat of day.

Another day came and passed. From the fertile section the lone horseman passed to the cactus lands, where every variety of the hateful spinous plants abounded. The ground seemed literally covered with them, and Hal was forced to ride with caution, carefully choosing his course so as to avoid the thorns.

The mountains loomed close at hand.

The second day found him in the mountains, and he set about searching for Zeb Horn and

his companions. Nearly an entire day was spent in this manner, but the result was far from satisfactory. It was then that he decided to find the trail on the morrow and follow it up.

That night he camped in a well-chosen spot, making a supper of some small game he had brought down.

Hal slept with one eye open, as it were, for once, during the day, while surveying his surroundings from the side of a mountain, he had fancied he saw a familiar figure in the valley below.

"Cranston is on my trail," he said, with a harsh laugh. "The fellow actually means to hunt me down and wipe me out. Well, I will try to be watching for him when he comes."

It was but natural he should feel bitterly toward the deserter, for it seemed that Cranston had ruined his happiness, still Hal did not wish to have the fellow's blood on his hands.

"That would bring me no nearer the prize I covet," he thought. "In fact, it would only place me further from her. If Cranston keeps out of my path, I shall not harm him, for all of anything I may have said. I am not going to be a murderer because I have been unsuccessful in a love affair."

He did not fear Cranston, although he believed the man a treacherous schemer, but he did not wish the deserter to get him at an advantage. For that reason, he slept lightly.

From the place where he made his night camp a ravine ran downward to the gorge below. The place could only be reached by the ravine, and he fancied he would be sure to hear any one who attempted to ascend it.

Midnight passed without a sound to arouse the lone cowboy; but the night was not to slip quietly away.

Three o'clock. Already rosy dawn was tinting the east.

Suddenly the sleeper started up. The distant sound of angry voices had aroused him. With his hand on the butt of a revolver, he listened.

The sounds came up the ravine from the gorge below.

"It may be well enough to be ready for any emergency," he muttered, leaping up and flinging the saddle on the back of his horse, which had been hitched near at hand. "There is no telling what may occur."

In a few seconds he was ready for fight or flight. Then he listened once more.

The sounds were still to be heard. Evidently foes had met in the gorge at the foot of the ravine.

"I shouldn't wonder if the fur flew a little," observed the lone cowboy, as he detected a deadly ring in the cries. "If that doesn't mean blood, I don't know—Great Scott!"

Of a sudden he fancied he heard a familiar voice. Listening again, he was sure he had made no mistake.

"It is father!" he cried, softly, and at once he swung into the saddle.

The sharp crack of a revolver awoke the morning echoes, and a shriek of mortal pain floated up the ravine. Then came a rattle of firearms that told a deadly battle was inaugurated.

"I'm wanted there!"

Giving his horse the spur, Hal dashed at a breakneck pace down the ravine. He did not give a thought to the possibility of a fall that would break his neck; his only thought was to take a hand in the conflict. Before the gorge was reached he saw the flash of firearms.

In truth, Old True Blue and Spikey Joe were in a position of deadly peril. Spikey's treachery had been discovered, and a band of pursuing outlaws had overtaken him. Finding themselves trapped, Spikey and Old True were forced to fight for their lives.

"Pump it ter ther gosh darned skunks!" shouted the Trusty, working his revolvers rapidly. "Give 'em their larst eternal dosto!"

At a word from Truman, Mrs. Horn had reined her horse into a niche in the wall of the gorge, where she was well protected from the storm of bullets which flew about her protectors.

Spikey Joe had opened the conflict, and his first shot emptied a saddle. The outlaws returned the fire, and the traitor felt his flesh torn by bullets, but he sat like a rock in the saddle. At that moment Spikey showed a courage that would have made a hero of him had he not been born a natural rascal and ruffian.

As the outlaws pressed forward, Old True Blue's horse fell beneath him, leaving the veteran on his feet. Joe kept the saddle, although he was bleeding from half a dozen wounds.

It seemed as if the two men would be overpowered and crushed in another moment, but neither appeared appalled.

"Glory ter Goshen!" yelled Old True Blue, by way of encouraging his companion. "Yeou are doin' ther business, Spikey! Pump ther pills ter ther critters! Make 'em chaw lead! We're ther hard boys ter daown, an' don't yaou fergit that!"

But they would soon be overwhelmed if something did not intervene. In his own heart, Old True believed they were doomed, but it was his way to fight to the last gasp. He was one of

those persons who are never conquered until they are dead.

Suddenly, out from the mouth of the ravine at the side of the gorge shot a horse and rider, the latter uttering a wild shout that went echoing amid the rocks and crags. From the hands of the new-comer darted spouts of flame, as he sent a rain of lead among the astounded outlaws. Like a whirlwind, he was on them!

"Hurrah!" was the cry that pealed from his lips. "Come on, boys! Here they are! We will wipe out the whole band! Come on! come on! Hurrah!"

Crack! crack! crack! sounded his weapons, and every shot seemed to tell. The bandits were filled with amazement and dismay. Were there more to follow this human whirlwind? The thought terrified them, and they turned and fled in utter confusion, completely routed.

Single-handed, Hurricane Hal had turned the tide and won the victory.

Emptying his revolvers after the retreating outlaws, he turned to his father, uttering a shout of triumph and satisfaction.

"Hurrah!" he cried again—"hurrah for us! We did the business, father!"

"Great gosh all hemlock!" shouted Old True Blue, in an ecstasy of joy. "It's my boy—my own boy!"

In another moment Hal was off the horse and Old True was clinging to his hands, while he almost wept from pure delight.

"This is jest ga-lorious!" he declared. "Oh, boy, boy, hain't yaou a holy howlin' horror on trucks! Didn't it do my old soul good ter see yeou come sailin' in thar like a rocket! Didn't yeou pump chain-lightnin' an' chug-shot ter them 'arnal critters! Ther way yeou knocked 'em over wur deelightful ter witness—it wur! Ef I never wur praud of yeou b'fore, boy, yeou kin bet yeour dosh I be neow!"

"You are enthusiastic, father," laughed Hal. "But, are you not wounded?"

"I reckon none ter speak abaout, though some of them bullets snipped me a dite in spots. We wur givin' them a tough ole scrummage, boy, w'en yeou piled in; but they'd daowned us in ther end, I callate. It wur clean luck that kep' them from saltin' us both."

"And reckon your companion is salted, as it is!" exclaimed Hal, as he saw Spikey Joe reel in the saddle.

Hal leaped forward and caught the falling man, lowering him to the ground. Spikey seemed covered with blood.

"This is ther end of ther hull business," he huskily whispered, as the cowboy assisted him to a comfortable position. "I hain't got only jest er few minutes more. I'm done fer, but I fit ther best I knowed how."

"That's whut yeou did, Spikey," averred Old True. "Ef yeou never acted ther hero afore, yeou jest did then."

No heed was paid to the dead and wounded outlaws about; all were thinking of the dying traitor just then—for it was plain Spikey Joe was dying.

Mrs. Horn dismounted and came forward, leading her horse. Hal greeted her as warmly as ever, and, little dreaming what had occurred, she called him her "boy." The poor woman was all atremble with excitement, but she did her best to bear up bravely, and succeeded wonderfully.

"I done my best fe' ye, Mis' Horn," said Spikey, faintly.

"Thet's w'at ye did, pore feller!" and the woman was on her knees beside him. "Can't we do anythin' fer ye?"

"No," was his reply. "I don't deserve ter hev anythin' done fer me. I done my best fer you, but it wuz fer myself I wuz workin' all ther time. It wuz Old True Blue's promise ter help me git East ter my ole mother thet made me do w'at I did. I'm a pore, miser'ble wretch, an' I hain't got no more'n I deserve—I know thet."

"Don't—don't talk thet way."

"It's ther truth. I wuz er devil ter play ther traitor in ther fu'st place. I kin see it all now. An' thar wuz pore Miss Kate—she allus used me like I wuz a gentleman—an' I tuck a han' in ther dirty work. I kerried her ter ther cellar. To be course I wuz rough an' hard. Oh, no! I'm only gittin' w'at I deserve."

He stopped for want of breath. It was plain he was going fast. In the East the rosy flush of coming day was spreading. From some brush on the mountain-side came the pipe of birds. With the birth of a day was to come the end of a life.

"Pray—fer me—Mis' Horn!" entreated the doomed man.

The good woman willingly complied. Her prayer was low and earnest, and it touched the heart of the sinking wretch.

"Thankee, Mis' Horn," he said, when it was ended. "I'm shore I feel—better—now—Jim—go—"

Spikey Joe was dead!

CHAPTER XXIII.

FROM THE QUICKSANDS.

THERE was little time to be lost, for the outlaws might return, but Hal and Old True found a natural grave, in which they placed Spikey

Joe's body and covered it with earth. The dead and wounded outlaws received no attention; no time could be spared on them.

The Trusty's wounds were so slight that but one of them required any attention, and that was hastily bound up by Mrs. Horn. Then the three mounted and rode away.

"I can't understand why those fellows do not tackle us again," said Hal.

"I callate yeou completely dumfusticated 'em," laughed Old True Blue. "Ef Red Han' him own self hed bin thar they w'dn't 'a' druv so easy. It'd take more danger of death ter make that critter quail."

"Then it was fortunate for us Red Hand was not there. But there is one thing I fear."

"What?"

"It is coming morning, and the devils will be able to trail us. If we only had darkness to cover our flight, we would be all right."

"That's so," confessed the old man; "but we'll do aour level best ter slip 'em. Spikey Joe didn't know they wur arter him."

"I thought Spikey Joe had proved a traitor? I was amazed when I saw him, and some words he uttered just before he died puzzled me still more."

Old True briefly explained how it came about that the treacherous cowboy had proved a traitor to the outlaw chief.

"He feared ther Red Han' w'd hunt him daown," said the veteran, in conclusion, "but he never dreamed it w'd be did so soon."

"He met an easy and merciful death."

"Yas; but he fit like er man, no matter whut he'd done in ther past."

Hal spoke with Mrs. Horn, saying some things to cheer the woman. She was holding out bravely.

"I b'lieve I'll live ter see my gals once more," she said, determination expressed on her face. "God hain't so cruel as I hed begun to think He wuz."

The sun came up in the east, but was hidden from their sight by the grim walls which surrounded them on every hand.

"Father."

"Waal, Hal?"

"I reckon I will fall back and look after pursuers. If we are followed, we should know it."

Old True nodded, and the young cowboy slackened his pace, while the others rode ahead. At a favorable spot, he reined his horse behind a protecting point of rock and sat there with his eyes turned back along the gorge. In his hands he held a brace of revolvers.

"Let them come," he muttered.

An hour passed, but not a pursuer appeared.

What did it mean?

"I cannot understand it," confessed the watching cowboy. "I felt sure they would be hot after us. Somehow, it is almost always the unexpected that happens. The bard ground of this section would only yield an intelligible trail to the eyes of a red-skin. Those men would not be able to tell whether there were one or twenty of us. Can it be they thought they were attacked by a large force, and that is why they are not making a hot pursuit?"

He almost fancied he had hit upon the truth, but determined to watch the gorge a while longer. If another hour passed and no pursuers appeared, Old True and Mrs. Horn would get such a start that they could not be easily overtaken.

"If Zeb and the others slacken their pace and wait for father, everything will go all right," soliloquized the young Hotspur. "Fortune seems to be with us, for all of the hard knocks we have received. 'Fortune!' he bitterly cried—"fortune favors all but me. For me there is nothing but misfortune!"

Another hour passed, and still there were no signs of pursuers. Hal decided they were not followed.

"That being the case, there is no need of my overtaking them. If I should remain with them till the party was reached, I would have to slip away when I was not watched or invent some excuse for leaving them. I will follow on at a distance."

From his saddle-bags he produced some dried beef, with a quantity of which he had supplied himself before leaving the ranch, and ate it as he rode along. He knew his horse needed feed and water, and he looked sharply for a spring or some indications of one.

"I must find one before I leave the mountainous section," he muttered. "The cactus plains are beyond, and there is no water there."

Far up the side of a mountain he found what he was searching for. Walled in by a half-circle of timber was a patch of green grass, and close under some dark rocks bubbled a little spring. Both man and beast satisfied their desires.

Leaving his horse to graze, Hal found his way to the verge of a great cliff, from which point he could survey a wide sweep of wild and broken country that lay to the southeast. Stretching himself in the shade of some rocks, he lay close to the very edge of the cliff, his chin supported on his hands.

For nearly an hour he lay thus, allowing his horse to feed. Once, miles away to the east, he

caught a glimpse of two persons on horses, and he felt sure they were his father and Mrs. Horn.

Suddenly his attention was attracted to the valley that lay directly below him. With an exclamation he partially started up. Down in the valley four horsemen were in view, and he saw a race for life was taking place. One of the men was in advance, and the other three were pursuing him.

"By heavens!" cried the man on the cliff. "As true as I live, I believe that lone horseman is Frank Cranston! But, who are his pursuers?"

It was plain the deserter was not pursued by soldiers, and Hal soon decided the three men were outlaws.

"If that is true, I have wronged him by supposing him one of Red Hand's band. I am ready to confess I do not understand the man. Hal! They are attempting to drop him!"

Tiny puffs of smoke burst from the uplifted hands of two of the pursuers, showing they had fired at the man in advance. But Cranston did not seem to be touched.

Suddenly the fugitive wheeled in the saddle, his hand was raised, and a puff of smoke leaped from it. Then one of the pursuers flung up his hands and plunged headlong to the ground, his horse galloping wild and unchecked.

"By Jovel that was a good shot!" exclaimed the watcher, in admiration.

And Hal's sympathy was with the fugitive, strange as it may seem.

Soon all three disappeared beyond a bluff that rose at the head of the valley, the pursuers having secured their comrade's horse, but still continuing the chase.

"By gracious! I want to see the end of that chase!" cried the Hotspur, leaping to his feet.

Back to his horse he ran, and in a few minutes he was guiding the animal down the mountain.

But Hal was not destined to see the end of the chase. When he reached a position which he had fancied would enable him to do so, he could see nothing of the three men. Plainly they had turned off by some other course than he thought they would follow.

"Well, I will go on," he said. "I shall follow the party from Red Spur till they are near enough to the ranch to be beyond danger."

Again he turned his face to the east.

The section through which he passed was strange to him, as he had entered the mountains some miles to the north; but he kept his course and picked his way slowly through the gorges and defiles.

It was near midday when he fancied he heard a cry of distress. Drawing rein, he listened. Had he been deceived by fancy?

No; there it was again!

"Help! help!"

Distinctly he heard the cry, although it came from far away. A human being was in distress.

"I wonder who it can be?"

But, Hal was not the one to hesitate. Having decided from which direction the sound came, he rode that way, pausing to listen once more when a certain distance had been covered.

Once more he heard the cry, and he believed it sounded nearer. He answered with an encouraging shout, regardless of the fact that it might put him in danger.

Riding onward again, he soon came to a broad, flat stretch of grass-covered land, walled in by high hills. About a third of the way toward the center of this expanse was a man and horse, but Hal uttered an exclamation of dismay as he saw them.

The animal had sunk until only its head and back were above the miry ground, which had been churned into a black porridge-like mass for fifteen feet on either side. The man had leaped from the saddle and was sunk to his hips.

They are in the quicksand!

The imperiled man greeted Hal's appearance with a shout of delight, but the cowboy suddenly drew rein and sat staring at the one entrapped by the treacherous ground.

"Great Heavens!" he muttered, hoarsely. "It is he!"

Yes, it was Frank Cranston!

At first the imperiled deserter had not recognized the horseman who appeared in answer to his cry of distress; but when he saw it was Hurricane Hal, he suddenly became silent.

For at least two minutes the young cowboy sat staring at Cranston, and all the time the man in the quicksand was sinking, sinking. Within Hal's breast was raging a fierce conflict. Before him was his hated enemy, and the man was caught in a death-trap from which there was no escape without assistance. He was slowly sinking to doom.

"It is nothing to me," Hal forced himself to say. "I did not lure him into the trap; he went there of his own accord. If the earth swallows him forever, I shall not be responsible."

But he knew he was not speaking the truth. He could save the man if he wished to do so, and if he let Cranston perish, would he not be as much a murderer as if he struck the man down with a knife?

"No, no; of course not! Were I in his place, he would not lift a hand to save me. He would

laugh to see me perish. I will leave him to his fate."

But he could not turn away. Something seemed to chain him motionless when he tried to do so. In vain he reasoned; with each passing moment he felt more and more like a criminal.

"Why doesn't he call for aid?" he muttered, staring at the now silent man. "He sees me, I am sure of that. Has he lost his voice? If he would only call for assistance! But he does not. Does he disdain my aid? Hal! then let him die like a dog!"

Again he tried to turn away, and again he found himself powerless to do so.

"Then I will remain and see him perish," came firmly from his lips. "When he sees I do not mean to render him any assistance, he will begin to beg for his life. The sound of his appeals should be music in my ears, but I am afraid I cannot withstand them. I wish I had not found him thus! If I had not, all would be well. With Cranston dead—my God!—might not Kate learn to love me again? I believe the man cast some kind of a spell over her! He must die! he must die!"

He set his teeth and steeled his heart. In a short time all would be over. He could not see that the man and horse were sinking, but he well knew they were. In the animal's distended eyes was a look of terror pitiful to see, showing the creature well knew it was being dragged down to death. Hal could not bear to look at it.

And the man? There was not a trace of fear on Frank Cranston's handsome face. He knew he was at death's door, but he did not show the white feather. He expected no assistance from the man who had appeared on the scene—he asked none! Like a man he would go down, his lips sealed.

Hurricane Hal was not insensible to the nerve displayed by his implacable enemy.

"If he were only a coward!" was the cowboy's inward cry. "It seems too bad for a brave man to meet such a death. I will save him—I must! But stop! If I were in his place! Ah! I must remember that! If I were in his place, he would let me go down!"

Once more he hardened his heart, resolved to render no assistance. It seemed that the hand of fate had grasped Cranston, to remove him from the path of the one to whom he had brought so much misery. And should that very person thwart Providence?

Hal's horse restlessly pawed the ground, giving a loud snort. Hal bent forward to pat the creature on the neck, but forgot what he intended to do, and straightened up again, his eyes fastened on the fascinating sight before him.

Suddenly he started. Over him had flashed the thought that some one was watching him! It filled him with shame. Some one beheld him as he sat there refusing to stretch a saving hand to a perishing man! If Little Kit should see him then!

"She would despise me forever!" he thought. "She would think me a coward. Great Heavens! I am a coward! Before my eyes a man is dying like a hero, and I am not offering to save him! Does any one see me? Yes! There is a God who sees all things!"

No longer he hesitated. He hated himself for his indecision. Springing from the saddle, he led his horse toward the spot where the grass-covered crust had broken and permitted the horse and rider to sink in the treacherous quicksand.

Cranston watched Hal approaching, but the deserter little dreamed of the cowboy's true purpose. He fancied Hal was coming nearer that he might more easily taunt a dying foe in his last moments, and a hard, defiant look settled on his resolute face.

Carefully testing the ground, the young cattleman advanced as rapidly as possible, for he knew he had little time to lose if he would rescue the one in peril. He little dreamed that Cranston was longing for him to break through the crust and become caught in the clinging mire.

Having reached a point from where he could work his lasso, Hal halted. Cranston broke into a bitter laugh.

"Why don't you come on?" he called. "A short distance further will be enough."

"This is quite enough," was Hal's calm reply.

"You dare not come further!" cried the sinking man. "If you did you would be in the same box as I! So you mean to stay there and taunt me as I go down!"

"I mean nothing of the kind."

"You do! you do!" cried the deserter, in fury. "But if I only had—"

By accident his hand fell on the butt of a revolver. He had sunk to his waist, but the holster of the weapon was not submerged. In an instant he had it in his hand, and wondered why he had not thought of it before.

"Hal! hal! ha!" he laughed. "You have come here to taunt me, have you? Well, now I hold the drop, and as there is a heaven above us, I mean to shoot you down! You shall die first! You shall never live to possess her!"

Hal saw a light of madness in the speaker's eyes, and he had no doubt but Cranston meant to keep his word. Still he did not quail.

"Shoot!" he cried, quietly facing the sinking

man—"shoot and thus destroy your only hope of escape!"

"Escape? What do you mean?"

"It is plain that you intend to murder the man who would rescue you."

"And who would rescue me—not you?"

"That is why I am here."

"You lie!"

"If you think so, shoot."

But, Cranston hesitated.

"I do not pause because I hope to escape," he declared; "but I would know the truth."

"Then remain quiet where you are and I will drop a noose over your head. Every moment is precious, for you are slowly sinking. In a short time more it will be impossible to save you."

"And do you think I will accept my life from your hands?" burst from the deserter's lips. "If you do, you have made a mistake! I would rather die like a dog!"

"But die you shall not!" declared Hal, his determination to rescue the imperiled man increasing. "Did you think I would see you die before my eyes and not lift a hand to save you? It is true you are my enemy, but I will have you out of there within another minute," and the Cowboy Hotspur deliberately prepared for the cast.

"Stop!" shouted Cranston. "If you try it, I will surely shoot you! Go, go! I no longer want your life!"

Hal lifted the coil and swung it around his head. Then the writhing *riata* shot out.

Cranston tried to avoid the noose, but he was not successful.

Over his shoulders it settled, and his uplifted arms aided Hurricane Hal in his purpose.

Into the saddle now leaped the cowboy, the rope was made fast, and, at a word from his master, the good horse settled down to a steady pull. The lasso became taut, and the strain checked the words which sprang to Frank Cranston's lips. It seemed as if the noose would cut him in two, and the pain compelled him to catch hold of the lariat in order to lessen the strain upon his body.

In that manner he was slowly and successfully dragged from the quicksand.

Hurricane Hal had saved his bitterest enemy!

CHAPTER XXIV.

ANOTHER TRICK.

THOROUGHLY disgusted at his fortune, Frank Cranston arose to his feet, throwing off the lasso as soon as he could do so.

Hal calmly coiled the rope, not even casting a glance toward the man he had saved. The revolver was still in Cranston's right hand, but he made no offer to use it.

When he had cared for his lasso, Hal drew a revolver and rode toward the deserter. Cranston did not move, but he watched the cowboy with interest, wondering if Hal had dragged him from the quicksand to shoot him afterward.

But even then Hurricane Hal did not cast a glance toward his enemy. Lifting the revolver he fired two shots in swift succession, and both lodged in the brain of the mired horse.

"It is impossible to save the animal," he said, by way of apology, "so that was the best thing to be done."

Cranston did not reply. His eyes glowed strangely as they rested on Hurricane Hal's manly figure, but it was impossible to read his thoughts by the expression on his face.

Silence fell between the two men.

Hal was the first to speak:

"I was obliged to kill your horse, but mine is at your disposal."

A harsh laugh came from Frank Cranston's lips.

"How kind you are!" he said, sarcastically.

"I fail to see your object."

Hal threw out one hand.

"Don't!" he exclaimed. "I have had to fight one battle with myself to-day; do not compel me to fight another."

The deserter fell back a step, gazing wonderingly at the cowboy.

"Why didn't you leave me in the quicksand?" he finally asked.

"I was tempted to do so," confessed Hal; "but I thank God my better nature led me to save you!"

"I would have been better satisfied had you left me there! Now I am in debt to you for my life—to you! And I hate you with all my heart. Perhaps I ought not to hate you now, but I believe I do, more than before, for without my consent, you placed me under such obligation to you."

"Whether you hate me or not is nothing to me. I have done my duty in saving you. I shall feel better for it."

"Do you think I would have pulled you out had you been in my place?"

"I do not know or care."

"Well, I would not! But, now that I am indebted to you, I will live to square the account. I swear it. The day will come when I shall save your life; Till then I shall not be satisfied. Do you hear?"

Hal bowed.

"You are putting yourself to unnecessary trouble—or will be in trying to save my life in any way. I have no account against you. You are human; that is why I dragged you from the quicksand."

"Just so. I think I understand you now, although I did not at first. Still, I mean to square the debt in some way. I will follow you—"

"You will not! I am going far away. Now that you are free from the quicksand, we are equal. Once more you are my enemy, and as such I shall treat you. If you were to follow me, it would be to your death."

Cranston laughed, sneeringly.

"That does not disturb me in the least. What do you think I care for death? What do you think I have to live for?"

The cowboy looked at him, sharply.

"You should have much to live for."

"What?"

"Fool! Do you so lightly value the love of so pure and noble a girl as Kitty Horn?"

"Now you are talking strangely. Do you fancy Kate Horn cares for me? If you do you are mistaken. I would to God she did!"

Hal had half turned away, but he wheeled toward Cranston like a tiger, crying:

"What do you mean, man? Speak out! Are you trying to play some kind of a game on me?"

"No."

"But, Kate Horn does care for you! You have robbed me of her!"

"If so, I am unfortunate enough not to possess the spoils of the robbery."

Hal would have grasped the deserter's shoulder, but Cranston struck the outstretched hand aside.

"Do not touch me!" he cried. "I can stand much, but I will not stand that!"

"I have no desire to touch you," spoke Hal, with as much reserve as possible. "But, there is one thing I must know: Have you not taken my place in Kate Horn's esteem?"

"I fear not," was the honest confession. "I am not going to lie to you, however much I may hate you. I would give the world to win her, but she is not for me."

"But, I found you there—at the ranch. She had hidden you to keep you from the clutches of the soldiers."

"She believed it was her duty, as I saved her from a false marriage and rescued her from the outlaws. That is why she concealed me."

Again Hal turned half away, but it was to conceal the emotion he knew was depicted on his face. Could it be he had made such a fearful error? The thought nearly overcame him, but he nerved himself to calmness.

"If I could only believe your words," he slowly said. "Then—then there might be happiness for me still."

"Little do I care whether you believe or not. I fancy I am a fool for telling you but something forces the truth from my lips. Had I remained silent, it is possible you would have believed she cared for you no longer."

"Not only possible, but an actual fact."

"And had you heard her storm at me after our meeting at the ranch you would have realized your folly. Had you heard her tell me how bitterly she hated me, and all because you treated her in such a manner, you would have awakened to the truth."

Hal slowly lifted one hand to his head.

"I am awakening now," he murmured. "I begin to understand how foolish I have been. Cranston, I saved your life a few minutes ago, but you are in no way indebted to me. Since I dragged you from the mire, your words have more than amply repaid me."

"Perhaps you are satisfied, but I am not."

"No, I am not fully satisfied. That I shall only be when I hear her assure me I still have a place in her heart."

A hard look passed over the deserter's face.

"Oh, you are the fortunate one!" he grated, fiercely. "Look at me—an outcast! a hunted creature! I love that girl with all my heart, but she cares nothing for me. You are favored—you are honored—you are trusted; and you have won her love! That is fate!"

"Cranston, I fear I have misjudged you. Your situation is truly anything but pleasant. Fate seems against you, and you have my sympathy—"

"Oh, curse your sympathy!" retorted the deserter. "I want none of it!"

Hal slowly bowed.

"Then we will let it rest at that."

Cranston turned and walked deliberately away, never pausing to cast a glance over his shoulder. Once Hal was tempted to call to the strange man, but he restrained the impulse.

"Let him go," he muttered, a look of compassion in his dark eyes. "His heart is full of bitterness, and I do not wonder at it."

In safety Old True Blue overtook the party in advance, for they had halted to wait for him, feeling sure he would follow them.

Little did they expect to see Mrs. Horn with him.

The meeting between the rancher and his wife can be imagined much better than described.

Few words passed between them, but their hearts were overflowing with joy and gratitude. After the first excitement of the reunion was past, the rough men turned away and left them alone for a brief time.

Old True could not understand why Hal had not overtaken him, and he was worried about the daring cowboy.

"It'd be jest like him ter 'tact ther hull aout-law gang an' try ter hold 'em back while I got arf with ther woman," asserted the veteran. "He's clean grit, but his judgment 'd down him ef he wurn't a perfec' hurricane. He rushes in ter danger an' clean threw it afore it gits time ter tetch him. I tell yeou, by gosh! I'm praproud of that boy!"

Although he was anxious about Hal, he knew it was not best for the party to make any delay in getting back to the Red Spur, and he freely expressed his mind on that point.

"Them confounded aoutlaws'll be snoopin' arter us farst ernough, I cal'late. We'd better lose no time in gittin' aout of this territory."

"Let him come," said Maverick Mat. "We have men enough for him."

"That may be so, but I alwus made it a practice never to fight 'less I hed ter. I'm a peaceable ole rip, though I don't like ter be crowded. Anyhow, I'm in fer leaning torruds ther ranch."

The men felt that the Trusty's judgment was to be depended on. They held him in greater respect than ever, for had he not read Spikey Joe perfectly? Some of the party found it almost impossible to believe the traitorous cowboy had given his life in defense of one whom he had once turned against in such a dastardly manner. Still Old True Blue was able to convince them.

When once the return march to the ranch was taken up in earnest it was pushed untiringly, no time being wasted in loitering.

In vain Old True Blue watched for Hal. The dashing young cowboy did not appear.

"I'm feared he's got himself inter trouble," muttered the old man, soberly shaking his head. "He'd shorely be heur by this time ef he hadn't. Ef he don't show up abaout as soon as we reach ther ranch, I shall strike aout ter find him."

What excitement and rejoicing there was when the ranch was reached and Mrs. Horn was restored to her children. The men cheered until they were hoarse and fired a volley of shots into the air, while Mrs. Horn wept in the embrace of the two girls. By turns Zeb Horn laughed and cried, while Old True Blue literally hugged himself.

When the excitement had somewhat abated, Zeb mounted the door-step and made a short speech.

"I hain't much on ther talk," he began, in awkward fashion; "an' so I can't hafe 'spress my feelin's by words, but you kin bet your boots, pards, I feel powerful good! I want ter thank ye all fer w'at you hev done, an' 'specially ter thank my neighbors frum ther Cross Bar an' ther Tray. We hain't hed much fightin', but I know you'd stud by me ef ev'ry derved outlaw in Arizony hed tackled us. Some time I may be able ter show as how I 'preciate it. Anyway, you kin bet yer wealth thar's goin' ter be er rip-stavin' ole hoe-down in this yere ranch jest as soon as we kin git round ter it. Ther dance 'll begin at dark, an' I'll feel it my solum duty ter lick ther galoot thet starts ter go home 'fore daylight ther next mornin'. Ev'rybuddy 'll be 'vited, fur an' near."

This speech was received with cheers and expressions of delight, and, shortly after, those who did not belong at the Red Spur departed, each man having been shaken by the hand by happy Old Zeb.

But for all of so much happiness, there was a cloud over the heart of one person at the Red Spur. Little Kit's joy was mingled with sorrow, for she feared she would never see Hal any more. In vain she had looked for him with the others. He had not returned.

When at length the excitement was over, and she had retired to her room, she took a slip of paper from her bosom and gazed sadly at it.

"Oh, cruel, cruel!" she whispered, tears starting from her eyes. "To leave me with no more than this. Why did he not plunge a knife into my heart? He might as well!"

For the hundredth time she read the words which had been hastily written on the slip of paper. They were:

"MISS HORN:—I return you your presents, and trust you will never regret your choice. To-day I leave this house forever. Farewell.

"JACKSON BALLOU."

"Regret my choice!" she cried. "And he—he was my choice! 'Oh, thou of little faith! Had you trusted me more—had you believed in me, all would be well! He said he would leave this house forever, and I fear he will never return! Never return!" and she wildly paced the room. "Yes, yes, yes! he must come back to me! Oh, Hal, Hal! my love, come back to me—come back!"

Down upon her knees she sunk, her arms outstretched to empty space, the bitter tears running down her cheeks.

"My whole life will be blighted if you do not return!" she sobbed. "It seems as if you must

hear my call wherever you may be! Hal, Hal! my heart is calling to you! Come, come, come! I do not want to live without you! I was wrong in letting you go, but you were cold—so cold! I tried to speak, but the words froze on my tongue. And all this came about because of a little pride! Had I made you understand at first, it would be all right now, and we would be happy—happy! You are gone, gone, gone! You will not return! Then I will go to you—I will find you if I have to search the whole wide world over! At your feet I will ask forgiveness for my false pride! And then, near you, my love, I will be willing to die, for I know you will forgive me, and I shall be happy—I know it!"

If he could have seen her then, little time would have been lost in coming to an understanding. Her beautiful face was marked with the bitterest grief, and her aspect was one of despair.

"Hal!" she cried, unmindful that she might be heard beyond the confines of her room—"Hal, come back—come back!"

Then she started to her feet in a listening attitude.

"What is that?" she whispered, pressing a hand to her throbbing heart. "Hoof-beats! Some one is coming—coming at a gallop! Can it be—can it be he?"

She flew to the window and looked out. Up to the door dashed a horseman, but it was not Hal. Leaping from his foaming steed, the man was quickly thundering at the door.

"Who can it be and what can he want? Something tells me he is here to bring a message from Hal!"

She hastened to the door of the room, and was soon listening at the head of the stairs.

Down below the man was admitted.

"Is this ther Red Spur Ranch?" he asked.

Zeb Horn surveyed the sweating, dust-covered stranger from head to feet before replying:

"Yep, this is ther Red Spur," he answered. "Then I am all right," and the man gently touched his bushy black beard. "I wuz sent hyer by a young feller as lays dyin' over yen in ther hills."

"W'at's thet?" cried Old True Blue, starting forward. "A young feller? Who am he?"

"Said he wuz called Hal!"

"Hal! My boy!"

Above on the stairs there was a scream and a fall.

"It's Kate!" cried Zeb Horn. "She has heard!"

The old rancher hastened to the stairs, but he found his child coming down, her face white as the driven snow. She had not fainted, and she hastened straight toward the stranger.

"Where is he?" she cried. "Take me to him!"

"Be you Kate Horn?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Then you be the one he wants ter see."

"I know it; I know it!"

"Me an' my pard found him. He hed bin in some kind of a fight, though we c'u'dn't jest git at ther truth of it. He said somethin' 'bout outlaws. Ye see we wuz strikin' 'crost kentry ter Silver, an' wuz over in ther hills w'en we heerd a cry. We follered ther sound an' kem right onter a young feller all shot ter holes."

A gasping moan broke from Kate's lips.

"He didn't know much of anythin'," continued the stranger, "but we braced him up with whisky, an' he tole us a mess of stuff. Said a feller called Red Hand hed done fer him. Then he got wild, an' kep' callin' fer Kate, Kate, Kate!"

"Oh, yes, yes!" panted the girl. "He wants me! Take me to him!"

"All right, leetle gal. Thar hain't no time ter be lost ef yer wants ter see him erlive. He wuz goin' fast w'en I left, but he said he'd hold out tell he saw ye once more, so git redy ter start as soon as ye kin."

"I am ready now!" she answered.

"Then come on, ur ye'll not see him erlive. He is dyin' fer shore—"

"It is false! I am here!"

In at the open door stepped Hurricane Hal!

CHAPTER XXV.

RED HAND TO THE RESCUE.

HAD a bombshell exploded in the room it scarcely could have created more amazement. Every one stared at Hurricane Hal as if he were a spirit.

In the cowboy's right hand was a revolver, the muzzle of which was turned toward the breast of the bearded stranger.

"That man is an impostor!" declared Hal.

"The beard on his face is false! His story is an invention of his cunning brain, for I am here—alive and well!"

With a low moan, Kate Horn fainted in her father's arms. For a moment Hal's eyes were turned from the impostor, and the man fancied he saw his opportunity.

"Ter blazes with ye all!" he shouted, snatching out a weapon. But, before he could use it, it was wrested from his hand by Maverick Mat.

"Such toys are dangerous to fool with," laughed the muscular young cattleman. "Now hold a little easy, you!"

But the defeated rascal struggled with all his strength, and he was no mean antagonist.

"Hold him steady a bit, pard," said Hal, as Zeb Horn bore his unconscious child away.

"We will fix him so he will not squirm."

In a short time the impostor was bound hands and feet. Then Mat removed the false beard from his face.

"Great gosh all hemlock!" cried Old True Blue. "It's Slick Jack, as oily a hoss-thief as thar are in these parts! I knows that mug!"

Mike Maloney was on hand.

"Begorra!" he cried. "Wan look at thot moog wad fix anybody so they'd know it fer-ivver after!"

"He tried a bold game," said Hal; "but, luckily, I was on hand to block it. Now I propose to make him tell just what his little game was and who his master is."

"Of course his master is ther Red Han'," nodded Old True Blue. "Who else would want to play such a game?"

"Well, we will hear what he has to say about it."

"Then you'll hear nothing," was the dogged assertion.

Hal lifted his eyebrows.

"So?" came interrogatively from his lips.

"Well, we will see about that. If necessary, we will squeeze you a trifle."

"Squeeze erway, an' be derved ter ye!"

"We have little time to waste with you—"

"You hedn't better waste any."

"The quicker you talk the better it will be for you."

"Rats!"

Hal turned to Mike.

"Go tell the boys what has happened," he said.

The Irishman departed.

Once more turning to the captive, the cowboy spoke sharply, impressively:

"We do not mean to fool with you, as you will be sure to find out in a short time. As soon as the boys hear what has happened, they will be clamoring for your blood, and you should know how hard it is to hold cattlemen in restraint. As you are Slick Jack, a horse-thief, they will think no more of hanging you than of shooting a worthless cur. Lynching will be your fate, unless you choose to save yourself."

"An' how am I ter save merself?"

"By confession."

"Do you take me fer a fool?"

"I take you for nothing of the sort, for you have the reputation of being a shrewd and cunning rascal. For that reason I believe you will talk."

"Wal, thet's whar you are badly left."

"You will not confess?"

"Nary."

"Not even to escape lynching?"

"How do I know I'll escape it?"

"Is not my word enough?"

"No."

"Then you choose to hang?"

"As I'll hev ter anyway. Ef you wuz ter keep ther gang hyer frum hangin' me, they'd swing me w'en I wuz taken inter Silver. Oh, no! I hain't quite er fool!"

"You are more of one than I thought."

"I tell ye w'at I will do."

"Well?"

"I will confess ef you will promise ter set me at liberty with my hoss an' guv me thirty minutes' start. Now ef you want me ter talk, you'll do thet."

"And now it is you who think you are talking to a fool."

"You won't do it?"

"No."

"I knowed ye w'u'dn't, so I hain't any disappointed. Thet settles it."

"Hark!"

Outside the house there was a hoarse murmur of voices, a sound that swelled louder and louder.

"Listen to that!" cried Hal. "Do you understand what that means?"

The captive understood, for his face grew pale.

"Go erhead with yer rat-killin'," came through his clinched teeth. "You can't shake me!"

"That is a cry for blood."

"Let 'em yelp."

"Yeou've got er hard case thar, Hal," put in Old True Blue. "I cal'late we'll hev ter stretch his neck er leetle."

"I am afraid the boys will stretch it for good, if they stretch it at all."

"Wa-al, that'll only be whut he deserves."

"Which is true enough."

The sounds outside came nearer and nearer, and a moment later the cowboys were crowding about the door. At sight of Hal they uttered a shout of welcome.

"Bring out ther critter!"

"Whar is he?"

"We've got ther rope!"

"Thar's plenty of trees nigh!"

"Guv him ter us, Hal!"

"We'll tend ter his case!"

"Lynch him!"

Mike Maloney crowded in at the door.

"Av yez pl'aze, Mистер Hal," he said, "Oi hiv told th' b'ys."

"So I see," answered the cowboy, grimly. "Tell them to give me two minutes more with the fellow. I hope to bring him to his senses."

Mike stepped out to communicate Hal's wishes to the men, but the captive asserted:

"You're only wastin' time. I hain't goin' ter peach, an' don't ye fergit that!"

"Now look here," said the cowboy; "we know well enough who your master is."

"Then w'at are ye tryin' ter pump me fer?"

"We want to know *where* he is."

"Oh-ho! that's it? Wal, don't ye wish ye c'd find out?"

Hal ignored the derision expressed in the question, speaking calmly:

"We know your master is not far away, for it is plain he meant to lure Miss Horn into a trap. It is probable he is near with a large body of his men."

"So that's ther way you figger it?"

"It is. Is it not right?"

"You tell."

Maverick Mat had been standing near, his arms folded, quietly watching and listening while Hal tried to pump the prisoner, but now he lost his patience, exclaiming:

"What is the use to fool with him any longer, pard? Turn him over to the boys! They will either make him talk or stretch his neck!"

"That's right," nodded Old True Blue. "Ther 'tarnal critter's baound not ter talk, an' he needs his wozzle stretched. Jest let ther boys have him, Hal."

"You hear what they say," and the cowboy fixed his dark eyes on those of the prisoner. "This is your last chance. I am going to tell you what I will do."

"You say you be."

"If you will lead us to the spot where your chief and his men are concealed, I will let you go free and unharmed. Do you understand?"

"That is plain enough to understand."

"What do you say?"

"I say *no*!"

"Very well; that settles it. Cut his feet free, Mat."

The order was promptly obeyed.

"You have made your choice," said Hal, as he jerked the captive to his feet. "See that you meet your fate like a man and do not whimper when it is too late."

He led the prisoner to the door and delivered him into the hands of the cowboys; but as he turned back into the room, he spoke hurriedly to Old True Blue and Mat:

"Follow them, and do not let them hang that fellow for good. Give him such a choking as will completely cow him, then force him to talk. If he is not made of iron, he will not be able to stand the persuasion of the rope. If Red Hand is close by and waiting for a chance to come down on us once more, we must know it. I will be along in a few minutes."

So Old True and Mat followed the cowboys, while Hal remained behind to ascertain how Kate was.

Straight to the nearest trees the cattlemen conducted the prisoner. Several of them knew Slick Jack, and they flung a score of bitter taunts in his face.

"He killed poor Tobe Rawson!" shouted one.

"An' Tobe wuz a white man!"

"Shot him off his hoss, then gaffled ter the annimile!" put in another.

"An' he stole ole Pete Jackson's burro, ther only thing Jackson hed in ther worl' of his own 'cept his clothes."

"Oh, he's er coyote—he is!"

"We'll hev him swingin' ter ther limb of er tree in less than five minutes!"

"You bet yer boots we will!"

The noose of a lariat was slipped around the prisoner's neck and he was dragged along in the center of the mob. His face was still very white, but his lips were firmly set, as if he had resolved to die game.

Old True Blue and Maverick Mat followed the cowboys, who halted beneath a tree just beyond sight of the house. The lariat was flung over a limb and Slick Jack would have been swung into eternity in another minute, when Old True Blue pressed forward.

"Hold on a bit, pards," cried the old man. "Ef this critter has got anythin' ter say, let's give him a chance ter spit it aout."

Some of the cattlemen grumbled, but Maverick Mat followed the Trusty to the horse-thief's side, seconding the expression by a few crisp words, and finding a chance to whisper in Slick Jack's ears:

"Speak out now, like a man, and we will save your neck. Refuse and up you go!"

The reply was a derisive smile.

"Would it be 'like a man?' asked the prisoner; and despite himself, Mat admired the fellow's grit.

"You will be foolish if you do not speak," the young cowboy declared.

"I am no Spikey Joe," was the retort.

That was enough to confirm Mat in the belief that the captive was one of Red Hand's outlaws.

"If you will not talk, you had better say your prayers," the cowboy warned.

"I know nary pra'r."

During this time Old True Blue had been saying something to the leaders of the cowboys, and they nodded their acquiescence.

Finding the prisoner still obstinate, Maverick Mat turned away.

"He won't peach?" asked Old True.

"No."

"Then that settles him. Go on with yer fun, boys!"

Scarcely had the words left the old man's lips when the captive was dangling in the air, kicking and squirming. The Trusty watched him a moment, then gave a signal, at which the man was lowered to the ground, where he was caught and supported by Mat, whose hand instantly loosened the choking noose.

Catching his breath with a hoarse gasping sound, the poor wretch began to cough.

"We're 'tarnal sorry fer yeou," solemnly declared Old True; "but we clean fergot ter tie yer feet, an' yeou wur kickin' so thar wur danger of breakin' ther limb. We alwus mean ter do this business up right, by gosh!"

A groan came from the lips of the unfortunate man.

"Fer—God's—sake!" he articulated. "You don't—mean—ter swing—me up—thar—erg'in?"

"Oh, yes we do!" and the old man deliberately made Slick Jack's feet secure. "We never tackle sich jobs 'thout we go thre with 'em. We'll give yeou a leetle rest afore we swing yeou erg'in."

Maverick Mat improved the opportunity to say, in Jack's ear:

"Now is your time to get out of this. Speak out and I will prevent your being swung again."

An eager light came into the horse-thief's eyes.

"You can't," he declared, doubtfully.

"Oh, yes I can. Old True will be with me."

"W'at do you want me ter tell?"

"Who your chief is and where he is. We also want you to lead us to him."

That seemed to settle it.

"I won't do it!" gritted Slick Jack.

"All right," said Mat, endeavoring not to allow his disappointment to show in his voice. "Up you go again."

Almost before another word could be spoken the horse-thief was again swinging from the limb. This time he was allowed to remain longer than at first, but once more Old True Blue gave the signal for the men to lower away.

Slick Jack could not stand when his feet touched the ground.

"Too bad, too bad!" exclaimed Old True, as he bent over the tortured wretch. "Darned ef I didn't clean fergit ter put a kiverin' over yer eyes! We've got ter do this job up in proper style ur go aout of ther business."

The horse-thief was in a pitiable condition, but he was soon compelled to stand on his feet.

"Fer God's sake don't string me up thar er'gin!" he entreated.

"It all depends on yourself," asserted Maverick Mat. "You can save yourself, if you will."

"You'll pull me up ag'in ef I don't peach?"

"Yes."

The unfortunate wretch hesitated.

"I can't do it!" he finally cried. "Ef you must hang me, go ahead; but fer heaven's sake don't let me down ag'in! Keep me up thar!"

The appeal made Old True Blue sick at heart.

"This has been kerried too fur," declared the old man. "Thar hain't no daoubt but this critter desaves death, but it hain't ther right thing ter torture him. An' after hangin'—"

"You will not hang him!"

Unnoticed, a horseman had ridden close upon the lynchers, and at his words, they wheeled to find themselves covered by a brace of revolvers held in a pair of crimson-gloved hands.

Red Hand had come to the rescue!

CHAPTER XXVI.

WIPED OUT.

THERE was no mistake; the masked man on the splendid black horse was the Chief of the Marauders, Red Hand the Hills Scourge!

And he held the drop!

"Ha! ha! ha!" he laughed, in a manner that sent the cold chills down the back of many a man. "You did not expect me—you did not think me so near! No, no, no! Well, it is a way I have, this getting around, especially since I came back from the dead. Back from the dead! Ha! ha! ha! You would have killed me—you *did* kill me! But I swore I would come back, and here I am. You thought I would not dare venture here so soon after all that has transpired. Fools! I dare anything! I fear neither Heaven nor hell!"

A sharp, shrill whistle broke from his lips. It was answered away back in the grove. Then came the tread of heavy feet.

"Ha! ha! ha!" once more rung out that wild laugh. "Do you hear it? My gallant boys are coming!"

"Great gosh!" shouted Old True Blue. "Ther aoutlaws are on us!"

"Yes, they are on you!"

Crack! crack! crack! A stream of shots broke from the weapons of the red-banded chief. Through the grove came a body of horsemen,

yelling like fiends. The advantage of a surprise was on the side of the outlaws.

Maverick Mat's voice rung out:

"Stand your ground, every man! Give 'em shot for shot! Don't let them drive you!"

But the cowboys were forced back by the whirlwind-like assault. Under the gallows-tree swept the outlaws, and their comrade was snatched from the noose. Then they wheeled and were away, almost before the cattlemen realized their design.

Some of the hot-headed cowboys would have attempted following afoot, but Old True Blue's voice checked them.

"Hold hard!" yelled the veteran. "They'll git clean orf! Ter hoss, ev'ry man!"

Maverick Mat saw that was the right thing to be done, and lent his aid in turning the thoroughly aroused men toward the stables.

Hurricane Hal was rushing toward the point of battle, weapons in hand, when he heard Mat shouting for the men to mount, and he at once turned toward the stable. Thus he was the first man in the saddle.

The others were not far behind.

Fresh horses were secured, and the men were eager to be after the bandits. Little time was cut to waste. Hal gave the order and led the pursuit. Although he had not asked a question, he seemed to know exactly what had happened.

All saw the chase was to prove a hot one, with good prospect of a fierce fight at the end.

"We've got 'em, by gosh!" exultantly cried Old True Blue. "Aour hosses are fresh, an' theirs hev bin drive hard. Some of them imp's'll roast their shins at a 'tarnal hot fire b'fore another day."

But the outlaws' horses had been chosen for endurance, and they proved harder to overtake than those in pursuit had anticipated. Mile after mile was covered, and still the daring bandits held the lead.

"Are they going to get away from us after all?" grated Hurricane Hal. "It will be a disgrace if they do, but night is not so very far away. If their horses hold out till after it is dark, they will be able to give us the slip, I fear."

"If we should overtake them, we might not be able to overpower them," observed Mat. "They have as many men as we, although they have lost many of their men of late. It would be a desperate battle."

Toward the hilly country the outlaws were heading, and they were soon where the land was broken into great rolling swells. At times these swells hid the bandits from their pursuers.

It was during one of these times that the cowboys were amazed to hear the sharp, rattling report of firearms ahead, the sounds seeming to indicate a battle was taking place.

"What in time does that mean?" cried Maverick Mat.

"Business, yeou bet!" retorted Old True Blue. "Them aoutlaws hev run bunt ag'in' a snag of some kind."

Hal said nothing, but prepared his weapons for use, an action which the others imitated.

From the top of the next swell a strange scene was revealed.

In the hollow beyond, a fierce battle was taking place. The outlaws had unexpectedly run upon a squadron of cavalry, and, as the bandits were in mask, the Blue-coats had at once recognized them for what they were. Seeing there was no escape, the outlaws had delivered the first fire. The battle had followed, the object of the bandits being to break through and continue their flight.

The struggle was at its height when the cowboys appeared on the swell above. Hal led the charge, and the entire party came thundering and yelling down into the hollow below.

The outlaws were doomed, and they saw it. Losing all hope, they tried to take to flight, but were remorselessly toppled from their saddles or captured. In this latter work the lassoes of the cowboys were put to good use.

"Make prisoners of all you can," shouted Hurricane Hal. "Shoot only those you are obliged to. They will meet a just retribution."

His orders were faithfully obeyed, and short work was made of the Marauders. It seemed as if every man had been killed or captured. The prisoners were promptly turned over to the soldiers, who proved to be a squad out in search for Cranston, the deserter.

"Great gosh all hemlock!" laughed Old True Blue. "This is ther kind of work that duz my ole soul good! Them critters have troubled these parts long enough."

"They will cause no more trouble around here," assured the young officer in command of the troopers. "Their days of crime are over. Not one escaped."

"Then Red Hand himself must be among the dead," asserted Hal. "He is not a captive."

Assisted by Mat and Old True, Hal began searching for the outlaw chief. Every body was carefully inspected and the masks removed. When they came to the last one and it failed to show the face of Red Hand, cries of astonishment and raga broke from their lips.

"Holy snakes!" cried Trusty. "Whar is that imp of sin?"

"He is not here," said Mat.

"He has escaped!" declared Hal.

But they were not ready to believe it possible, for no one had seen the leader of the bandits slip away, and it did not seem possible he could have done so without being observed. However, they were forced at length to acknowledge he was neither among the slain or captured.

"He's sartainly in league with ther devil!" averred Old True.

It seemed so.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BALANCING THE ACCOUNT.

Two months passed.

Zeb Horn kept his word. There was a grand dance at the Red Spur Ranch, and guests from hundreds of miles around were in attendance. It was a night of merrymaking long to be remembered in that section.

Everybody was received in a hospitable manner, for the invitation was genuine, and a motley throng assembled. Many came from other ranches, and not a few were from Silver City. Zeb Horn was in his glory, and Old True Blue seemed enjoying himself to the utmost.

"This is a great an' ga-lorious night, Zebbie!" grinned the Trusty, as he gave the host a slap between the shoulders, nearly knocking him off his feet.

"Wal, dern my skin!" growled Zeb, wheeling around and shaking both clinched fists under Old True's nose. "Ef you crack me erg'in like that, I'll gouge your eye out!"

"Ha! ha! ha! he! he! he!" laughed the Yankee. "That makes me think of a Bantam spur-rin' up ter a Shanghai—yas, it do! Ho! ho! he! Yeou can't tell haow you do tickle me, Zebbie!"

"Oh, I tickle ye, do I?" fumed Zeb, in imitation of a very angry man. "Wal, I'll tickle ye with these yere jukes o' mine!"

"Oh, come an' see me!" cried Old True, putting up his hands in business style.

Zeb accepted the invitation. With a leap, he struck out at the old man, only to be caught in Truman's strong arms and held close to the veteran's broad breast.

"Great gosh all hemlock!" he laughed. "Darned ef yeou didn't actually do it. Oh, but whut 'd yeou 'maount ter with this old feller!"

Zeb squirmed, but could not break loose. After a few moments True released him, exclaiming:

"Thar goes ther moosic, Zebbie, an' I must shaik a fut this time. We'll have this hurl aout some other day. Come on an' git yeou a partner, ole man."

Then the two ambled away, arm in arm, searching for partners.

Well might they be happy. Everything looked bright and pleasant around them. Their troubles appeared to be over, and their children were with them. For two months they had been unmolested by rustlers, and they believed the Red Hand had perished beyond a doubt. It was thought he had been wounded in the battle and crawled away to die.

But, Red Hand was *not* dead, as they were soon to discover.

Among the happiest who joined in the dancing were Mike Maloney and Norah, the choice of his heart.

"It's lookin' swate ye are, me darlint!" whispered Mike, as he found Norah alone in the kitchen.

"Oh, go 'way wid yez, Misther Flatthery!" was her retort. "Doon't be afther coomin' w'eedlin' arount me afther phwat yez hiv doon!"

"An' phwat is thot, Norah, gel?"

"As if ye did not know, ye spalapeen!"

"On me saoul, I doon't!"

"Well, it's not Oi thot will be tellin' av yez at all, at all, d'yez moind thot, noow!"

"Oh, yez be afther t'azin' me, Norah!"

"T'azin' is it? Nivver a bit w'u'd Oi put me-silf out to t'aze th' loikes av you!"

If scorn could have crushed him, poor Mike would have been utterly exterminated then.

"Begorra! Oi doon't untherstand yez at all!" he cried.

Norah gave him a look of disgust.

"Oi always knowed ye wur thick-hided, Moike Maloney!" she retorted. "It takes a cloob ter b'ate anything inther yez brain, so it does!"

"Well, thin, joost be afther b'atin' this matter in, will yez, Norah? Oi kin sthand it so long as you are doin' th' b'atin', sure Oi kin!"

"It's a moighty limber toongue ye hiv, Moike, but yez can't fool this gel. Joost be setthin' thot doon wheer ye'll remimber it!"

"Say, Norah?"

"Well, sur?"

"Av ye doon't tell me whut yem'ane, Oi'll be afther kissin' yez."

She shook her fist at him.

"Thry it av ye dare!" she cried.

"Will yez tell me?"

"Nivver a bit!"

"Thin Oi will kiss yez!"

"Oi'll scratch yer oies out!"

"Ye doon't warnt me ter kiss ye?"

"Warnt ye ter! Whut d'ye take me fer?"

Oi'm a dacent Irish gel, Oi'd hev yez know!"

"Thin be afther tellin' me whut yez m'ane!"

"Oi won't!"

Mike slyly edged nearer the girl.

"Thin Oi'll hiv th' kiss!" he cried, and in another moment he had it.

Norah pretended to struggle with all her strength, but she only succeeded in breaking away when she had been kissed.

"Ye spalapeen!" she exclaimed, in seeming furious angry. "Ye ondacent odamahoon! Av I wur a marn—"

"Whut thin?"

"Oi'd break me arrum acrost yer noose!"

"Av ye wur a marn, Oi'd not be afther kissin' yez, Norah gel, so me nose w'u'd not break yer arrum."

Of a sudden, she began to snifle, carrying her handkerchief to her eyes. In an instant, Mike was at her side.

"Whut is th' matter, me darlint?" he anxiously asked.

"G'way!" she gurgled. "Doon't ye tooch me! Oi hiv been insulted! Doon't ye put yer arrum round me wai-t! D'yez think Oi'll sthand thot? Doon't ye do it, Moike Maloney!"

Mike had not been making a motion to do such a thing, but her order seemed to make him bold. In a moment his arm was around her waist, but she pretended not to notice it, continuing to sob.

"It's enooch Oi hiv been insulted! Oi'd doie wid shame av ye wur ter put yer arrum round me waist! An' av ye wur ter squaze me"—Mike promptly gave her a hug—"Oi'd nivver git over it in all me loife! An' as fer kissin' av me ag'in— How dare ye, sur!"

For he had given her a resounding smack. Still she did not struggle very hard, and he easily held her, while he said softly:

"Noow, do be afther tellin' me, Norah, whoy yez tark ter me loike this. Whut hiv Oi done?"

"Didn't Oi say yez darnein' wid thot black-oied Mexican bussey, whoile Oi wur settin' in th' corner? An' noow ye ax whut hiv ye doon! Oh, Moike, Moike! ye hiv broken me barrut!"

"Theer, theer, me darlint! Oi'd nivver look at her av Oi'd thot ye w'u'd darnced wid me anootheer toime so soon. It's not th' loikes av her Oi'd be carin' fer."

"Honest, Moike?"

"Honest, darlint."

"An' yez don't care fer her wan bit?"

"Nivver a bit. Sthop croying thim swate oies out an' promise ye will marry me, Norah gel."

"Marry ye? Oh, Moike, ye be foolin'?"

"Oi am not."

"An' yez really wain't me ter marry yez?"

"Oi do."

"Oh, Moike!"

"Oh, Norah!"

"This is so suddint, Moike!"

"Nivver moind thot. Will yez do ut?"

"Perhaps Oi will av ye won't ax me ter marry yez too soon."

"Oi'll let ye set th' day, Norah."

"Thruly?"

"Yis, Oi will. Whin shell it be?"

"Ter-morry!"

Mike's astonishment at this reply did not prevent him from planting another kiss fairly on the girl's lips, and at that very moment Hal and Kate entered the kitchen.

"Hello! hello!" exclaimed Hal. "It looks as if we were intruding."

"Nivver at all, at all!" replied Mike. "It is all setthled an' th' day is sot. Av ye don't look out, we will be getthin' ahid av yez."

Mike and Norah left the kitchen, and Hal found himself alone with the girl he loved.

"Are you happy, little one?" he whispered.

"Yes, I am happy," she answered; but he fancied he saw a slight cloud on her fair face.

"But you are not perfectly happy," he hastened to declare. "I have seen that look on your face several times of late. There is a sadness in your eyes. What does it mean? I am here and our little misunderstanding is at an end. We have both seen our mistake, and—"

"It is not that, Hal," she assured. "I was thinking—thinking of him."

"Of whom?"

"Frank Cranston."

His face darkened for a moment, but cleared as quickly.

"What of him?"

"I have been wondering what his fate can have been, for nothing has been heard of him during the last two months."

"I have often wondered myself. Perhaps we may know some day. I thank God he can never come between us again."

"But I do not like to speak of this now. There is another matter on my mind. One of the cowboys present to-night, a fellow whom nobody seems to know, seems like a suspicious character. I have been watching him, but set Mat to keep his eyes on him while I got a few moments with you. If he should be— What's that?"

Loud and angry voices came from the great room where the dancing was taking place.

"It is trouble of some kind!" exclaimed Hal.

"I must be there."

He hastily kissed her and was escorting her from the room, when they were met by Sylva, who cried:

"Hal, Hal! you are wanted in there! Mat has accused a man of something, I do not know

what! He saw him talking with two other men outside the house. There is going to be a fight!"

Leaving the girls together, Hal hastened to the scene of the excitement. He found the women huddled in the corners, while the men were gathered around a common center. Forcing his way through the circle, he saw Mat confronting the suspected cowboy, a bearded fellow of rough appearance.

"Who are you? and where are you from?" Mat demanded.

"That is none of your business," was the cool and impudent reply.

Quick as a flash, Mat's fingers closed in the man's whiskers, and then the beard—which was false—was torn from his face. A cry of amazement and fear went up from a score of throats.

"Red Hand!"

It was in truth the outlaw chief!

"Yes, I am Red Hand!" he shouted, snatching out a revolver. "Ha! ha! ha! Die! die! die!"

Then he fired right and left. Some of the men fired at him, but the most of them scattered like frightened sheep. Straight toward the stairs darted the outlaw, seeming bent on escape.

And then another cry went up:

"Fire, fire! The ranch is afire!"

It was true. The building was afire in several places, a fact which plainly indicated the work of incendiaries. The flames spread with amazing rapidity, showing the destruction of the building had been carefully planned.

"It's ther work o' thet devil, Red Han'!" cried Zeb.

The rancher was right. Red Hand had struck another blow—his last!

Some of the men set about getting the women and the furniture from the doomed building, for it was seen the fire had been so cunningly set nothing could save the house. Others searched for the outlaw, who had suddenly and mysteriously vanished.

"What can have become of that devil?" cried Hal. "Is it possible he will escape us again?"

It seemed so, for when the advancing flames drove them from the building he had not been found.

"If he is in there, he will roast in a fire of his own setting," decided Mat.

"That's so," nodded Old True Blue. "Ef he's in thar, he won't be likely ter git aout."

"Whar's Kate?" cried Zeb Horn. "All ther rest seem ter be hyer but Kate."

At that moment a cry from a score of throats, for a face was seen at one of the upper windows—Kate's face!

"God in heaven! she's in thar!" screamed Zeb Horn.

He would have rushed into the flames, but Hal caught him by the shoulder and flung him into the arms of Old True Blue.

"Hang to him, father!" he shouted. "I will bring her out of that furnace!"

He rushed toward the house, Maverick Mat at his side. Without hesitation, they both plunged into the burning building.

"They'll be lucky ef they git out of thar alive," declared a cowboy.

Indeed, it seemed doubtful if either of the men would ever come forth from the doomed ranch.

"An' all this is ther work of Red Han'!" grated Old True Blue.

The moments passed slowly. Holding their breath, the throng in front of the building waited for the reappearance of the two cowboys. Some of the cattlemen were fighting back the flames, which threatened to communicate with the out-buildings.

Suddenly a great shout went up.

From the smoke-wreathed building staggered a man who bore a human form in his arms. Twenty persons rushed to his aid.

It was Maverick Mat, and he had rescued Little Kit!

Hurricane Hal was still in the burning building!

Mat was relieved of his burden, and assisted to a spot beyond the reach of flames and smoke.

But Kate struggled to break from the arms that held her.

"Let me go back!" she wildly screamed. "He is in there! I saw him struck down by a falling timber! Oh, Hal, Hal! my love! Let me go to him!"

But they held her fast, saying:

"She is mad! She would fling her life away!"

"I am not mad!" she asserted. "He is in there! Ah! what is that?"

Again a great cry went up:

"There he is!"

From the burning building staggered a man whose clothes were afire in several places, and whose face was blackened by the flames. In a moment he was seized and the flames were beaten out. Then he lay helpless on the ground, a hideous thing to look upon.

They tried to keep Little Kate from him, but she turned like a tiger upon them:

"Back!" she cried, her eyes blazing. "Do not dare try to stop me! I will go to him! Make way!"

And they fell aside to let her pass.

Straight to the poor wretch she walked, sinking on her knees by his side, and peering into that horribly burned face. Then she leaped up, shrieking:

"This is not Hal! My God! my God! He is still in that furnace of fire! Will no one save him?"

"Yes, I will save him!"

A man burst through the throng and dashed toward the house. Into the sea of flame and smoke he went, vanishing from the sight of the wondering spectators.

Kate had seen his face, and she sunk to the ground, gasping:

"Heaven above! Frank Cranston!"

The deserter-lieutenant had heard her cry and gone to save the man she loved, even though that man was his hated foe!

But, who was the fire-marked wretch who had been mistaken for Hal?

Slowly and painfully the man lifted himself and glared around.

"Water!" he gasped. "Dying—dying! This is the end! Ah—ah! This—is—the—end!"

Then he leaped to his feet, with a last burst of strength, screaming:

"This is all my work! I am Red Hand! Ah!"

Forward on his face he fell, dead the moment his body touched the ground!

Although this created some excitement, the attention of nearly every one was directed toward the burning building. Would either of the two men within the doomed house come forth alive? It did not seem possible.

Every second seemed a minute to the expectant watchers. Higher and higher rose the devouring flames, and with each passing moment the possibility of escape from their clutch was diminished.

"My pore boy!" groaned Old True Blue, covering his eyes with his hands. "I'll never see him no more!"

"Look thar! Hooray, hooray, hooray!"

Out from the burning ranch staggered a man who bore another flung across his shoulder. He did not get far. His strength failed and he went down, the man he had saved lying across his body.

Forward rushed a dozen men. Flames had caught in the clothing of the two who had come from the very jaws of death, as it were, but the fire was quickly beaten out. Then they were tenderly lifted and carried to where some blankets had been spread on the grass.

Kate hastened to the side of the man she loved, and as she did so, Cranston partially arose.

"I saved him," he said, huskily. "I swore I would balance the account, and I have kept my word."

"You have," and Kate clasped his hand.

"Frank Cranston, you are a noble hero!"

"No—not that!" and his strength failed him so he sunk back again. "You—love—him. I heard your—cry. It went—to my heart—I saved—him!"

"I will never forget it. You shall always be my dearest friend—and his."

Something like the shadow of a smile was seen on the deserter's drawn face.

"I shall not—need friendship," he declared.

"I—am—dying!"

"No, no!"

"Yes, I am dying. I have—taken—fire into—my lungs. Oh, I suffer—such pain!"

Kate could not believe the man was really dying, but it was soon seen he was.

Hal was soon restored to consciousness, having been stunned by a falling timber.

With Kate, he knelt at Cranston's side.

"Can—you forgive—Ballou?" faintly asked the sinking man.

Hal held out his right hand and lifted his left to heaven.

"I call God to witness I hold no shadow of hardness against you in my heart," he solemnly said. "If there is anything to forgive, I freely forgive all."

"Thank you," whispered Cranston. "I feel better—now. I think—I am—going. Please—kiss me—Kate!"

She complied with his request, and at the touch of her pure lips, his soul seemed to take its flight.

A word of explanation.

To this day it remains a mystery in Grant county concerning the second Red Hand. That the original Marauder was dead was a fact well known. That Sleek Saul was likewise dead also seemed a fact; but right there was where the deception lay.

The gambler was taken from the sheriff of Silver and was hanged to the limb of a tree, but the men who did the deed were outlaws—a desperado band in need of a chief. The lynching was in a measure a farce; the shooting was all a farce. Not a bullet touched the body of the man, but one of the party purposely cut the rope with a shot. Saul was stunned by the fall, and lay still when he fell. Then the sheriff and his companions were hurried away.

Some of the outlaws remained behind and resuscitated the gambler. Then another body was placed beneath the tree, and in the morn-

ing the men of Silver found what the wolves had left of a man whom the outlaws had murdered. The bones were not those of Sleek Saul, for the gambler was alive at that moment.

But, Sleek Saul was never again in his right mind. He believed he had really returned from the dead, and he thought he was both his dead brother and himself, as he had told Old True Blue.

Retribution had overtaken him at last.

Beside a grave stood a handsome man and woman. He called her his "darling wife," and she softly whispered: "Hal, my husband." Happiness was written on their faces, although deep in her blue eyes was a look of sorrow as she looked down at the grave.

"See, Hal," she gently said, "I planted those flowers there. See how fair they are! How sweet is their perfume! I wonder if he knows he is not forgotten?"

"Perhaps he does, Kate."

"Fate was against him, Hal, but he had a noble heart."

"He had, indeed. I did not understand him in life, and now he is dead, I cannot tell him the words I would. He loved you, Kate, for which I honor him! How fortunate a man am I that I have your love for my own!"

"But for him death would have sundered us."

He tenderly kissed her, and on the flowers of the grave she dropped a tear.

The soft glow of the setting sun fell on the pure marble headstone. These words were chiseled there:

"FRANK CRANSTON.

"Misjudged on Earth, Rewarded in Heaven."

THE END.

Beadle's Half-Dime Library.

BY WILLIAM R. EYSTER.

- 190 Dandy Darke; or, The Tigers of High Pine.
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